

Late at night, when darkness spreads like a blanket over the sky and the night owl grows weary of its perch, the sound of silence sweeps across the world. It travels through back alleys and empty streets, through darkened corners and shaded houses. But as the silence cries for rest, a single home evades the call of sleep. The building nestles on the corner of the street, standing at the last stop before a dead end. Despite its blackened windows and unlit porch, the house remains awake... but only barely.

Inside, a single light flashes from the living room, emanating from an old television playing recordings of an even older comedy show: *Ronald Laughs*. As black and white figures dance across the screen, the light illuminates the area and brings details to the shaded furniture surrounding the floor. In front of the TV, a crooked reclining chair wobbles under the weight of a twisted woman. Her face resembles that of a skeleton with cheeks as white as death and eyes as sunken as the sea. The woman's glossy orbs remain fixated on the television, their grayed-out irises dry from the endless staring. Even worse than her face, her breath reeks, and her knobby hands clutch the drink responsible for the smell. The only time she moves is when she brings the can to her parched lips.

Despite only taking sips at a time, her endless thirst leaves an array of cans tossed carelessly aside, and a growing stack lying close to her feet. Old stains from forgotten drinks soak into the carpet, seeping so far into the fibers that they become impossible to scrub out. Their presence, like much of the dingy living room, remains uncleaned and unnoticed; a permanent reminder of the state of the house.

But besides the television, the chair, the cans, and the stains, a temporary flash of color dots the dreary living room. A box of crayons lay scattered across the floor, their stubby rainbow bodies shining under the TV's light. Every time the show's host, Ronald, cracks a joke, the screen flashes, a roar of laughter erupts, and the crayons glow. They leave trailing shadows across the floor behind them, the streaks of darkness elongated on the ancient carpet.

Ollie, despite her young age, had already mastered the art of coloring. She knew that it was impossible to draw properly when you couldn't see, and the living room was always dark... except for when Ronald would make a joke. Whenever he spoke, the outcome followed a familiar pattern: a quippy remark, a boom of laughter, then finally a flash of light as the camera panned towards the audience's smiling, white faces. Then, the floor would light up and Ollie would see the red on her left, the black on her right, and the yellow lying precariously near her mother's pile of "funny drinks". How unlucky.

Ollie sat a small distance away from the back of the recliner; in a spot where she wouldn't be bothered. But somehow she'd knocked the yellow crayon forward, and it rolled right into the worst spot possible. Trying to retrieve the color was about as wise as crawling into a monster's den. Her mother was already feeling woozy from the "funny drink" she had in her hand, and occasionally let out a shriek of laughter at the TV. Despite her frenzied mood, Ollie knew the truth. The joyous laughter only remained when all her mother could think about was Ronald and his jokes. If Ollie caught her attention, only bad things would happen from there. But she *needed* that yellow crayon. She *needed* it to color in the sun. The drawing that she had been working so hard on could not be complete without a yellow sun.

For days now, she'd been working on a piece that depicted a self-portrait of a dark-haired girl wearing her favorite white dress and two figures standing beside her. The figure on the left showed a drawing of a woman wearing a beaming smile that stretched from ear to ear. She held a can of "funny drink" in one hand, and her daughter's fist in the other. The woman looked happy, and the crimson skirt she had wrapped around her waist reminded Ollie of an outfit that she hadn't seen in a very long time.

Besides the smiling woman, the outline of a man on the right held onto the girl's other hand. His silhouette lacked detail save for the black crayon that made up his shape. Perhaps he would have been modeled after Ollie's father, but she'd forgotten what he looked like a long time ago, so the shadow of a person would have to make do. But despite his lack of detail, Ollie

thought he looked perfect. The ideal man, after all, could only exist in her dreams. At least that's what her mother would always say.

The piece was perfect. From the smiling faces to the vibrant colors, everything fit in place: A happy family, with beautiful outfits, and a splendid life. Ollie had indeed created a masterpiece. Except for the sun. It's impossible to have a bright day without a yellow sun, and it's impossible to have a perfect family without a bright day. She needed that crayon.

Shifting to her hands and knees, Ollie steadily crept forward from her position, leaving her unfinished art piece behind.

"Now here's a real funny one for you folks at home!" Ronald started, his cheerful voice crinkling through the old speakers. Making use of this distraction, Ollie shuffled forward quietly. She kept her eyes glued to the back of the couch, watching as her mother stirred the drink in her hand. "Now," Ronald continued, "why did Icarus get into a plane accident?"

"That's easy!" Ollie's mother cried, her words slurred as she shrieked at the screen. Seizing the opportunity, Ollie lunged forward toward the yellow crayon. Her small hands collided with the wax as she closed her fist around it. Mission success! She breathed a sigh of relief and clutched the crayon to her chest. But as she turned around to make her way back, a chill crawled down her spine. Her mother had gone silent.

Slowly, Ollie turned her head towards the recliner. A ghostly pale face glared back at her. Her mother's lips trembled with rage and her eyes bulged wildly. Startled, Ollie dropped the yellow crayon.

"Mama, I didn't mean to-" she started, but her words were cut off when she saw a half-full drink being launched directly at her. Throwing her hands up in a feeble attempt to dodge, she squeezed her eyes shut as the liquid erupted from the can and drenched her clothes.

"Get out!" her mother shrieked, "GET OUT!" Not sparing another second, Ollie made a run for it, abandoning her precious drawing and her crayons in the process. "And don't come back until you've brought me another!"

Sprinting into the kitchen as fast as her feet would carry her, Ollie took a choked breath. Her vision grew fuzzy as hot tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. As she made her way towards the door leading outside, she heard Ronald deliver the punchline in the other room:

“You guessed it, folks! I guess Icarus couldn’t help but fly too close to the sun!”

Ollie was no stranger to her mother’s outbursts. Her erratic behavior and short temper could only be lessened by an offering of peace in the form of a drink in her hand. But the only place that they were stored was in the garage, the place Ollie hated the most. Maybe the reason why she despised the garage so much was because of the cold wind that blew through cracks, the buzzing light that flickered at the slightest disruption, or even the browned walls that creaked with the night. But even these features couldn’t explain her constantly feeling as if something was watching her, something sinister.

The garage itself looked plain enough. A single car gathered dust in the space closest to the inside door. Occasionally, Ollie would hear the sound of its rusted engine groaning to a start whenever her mother would leave the house. But the only times she would ever leave was when either the fridge was empty or her cans were. Other than that, the car would remain a relic in the depths of their broken home.

On the opposite side of the vehicle, stacks upon stacks of boxes lined the walls and floor. Inside their cardboard interiors, the boxes contained trinkets and articles long forgotten. Many held old furniture, folded clothes, dusty silverware, and forgotten photographs laying silent in the darkness. Anything that reminded Ollie’s mother of her father was tossed inside until the garage overflowed with cardboard and the air grew heavy with painful memories.

As Ollie opened the door, she felt the weight of these memories flood back into her as she glanced toward the boxes. If only her mother had the strength to get rid of them, maybe the garage wouldn’t feel as dark as it did. But while they remained, Ollie had no choice but to face the cold and retrieve the only thing her mother loved: her drinks.

The fridge itself was on the other side of the garage, past the high packing shelves and next to the junk-filled boxes. It hummed with energy and stood white against the dark gray walls.

As Ollie flicked the light on and descended into the room, she felt a shiver of cold creep through her body. The insulation around the garage door had been eaten away by scurrying mice, and the cold midnight air snuck through the gaps and seeped into the area. The light buzzed and flickered, its weak bulb barely illuminating the darkened interior. Shadows dwelt where light couldn't reach, and their unnatural shapes peeked at Ollie as she made her way to the fridge. She could feel the cold concrete floor pressing against her feet as she walked, causing her toes to curl in protest. Reaching the ice box, she sighed and pulled on the handle, letting the freezing air blow into her face as she checked the interior.

Her mother loved drinking. Rows upon rows of colorful cans filled the fridge from top to bottom, bearing a variety of brands and flavors that Ollie couldn't even read. But she knew what her mother's favorite was, and she raised herself on the tips of her toes so she could retrieve the drink from the back of the cooler. Tilting her head sideways, she stretched her small hands as far as her arms could reach, and felt the cool tin graze the tips of her fingers. So close!

"Come on," she whispered to herself, barely touching the drink again. "Come on...." She was right there. Just a little... more...

Woosh! Suddenly, a harsh wind howled outside and crept into the area. The light above Ollie's head swayed in the breeze and flickered violently, causing her to avert her gaze toward the disturbance. But as she glanced at the swinging light, a sudden flash of movement reached the corner of her eye.

Confused, she tilted her head towards the cardboard crates and the dark emptiness that surrounded them. The ceiling light buzzed loudly, and the humming from the fridge grew apparent in her ear. By now, she'd gotten used to the coldness of the garage, and yet a strange shiver crawled down her spine. She focused her vision on the darkness, towards the shadows

stretched across the wall until the shades of black began to swim and circle in her mind. As she peered into the looming tendrils of emptiness, her heart sank as she began to realize... *something* was peering right back.

Stumbling, Ollie fell backward with her mouth gaping open in a silent scream. She didn't know what she was looking at. She couldn't even believe her eyes. Staring at the shadows, a slender mass of black fur and a tangled wrap of bony limbs blended in with the darkness. The light flickered, and in a flash, the creature snapped its neck toward Ollie and glared at her with red, glowing eyes.

Stunned in place, she could do nothing but watch as the *thing* unraveled itself before her. Twisting and bending, its limbs snapped outwards with a crunch. Slowly, terribly slowly, the monster grew in size until the shadows could no longer contain its mass of fur, skin, and bones. Crooked hands and feet expanded outward and burst towards the floor, balancing the creature while the rest of its slender body rose towards the ceiling with a trembling groan.

As the monster's decrepit shoulder smashed into the flickering ceiling light, the bulb swayed from its chain and caused the streaking shadows to swirl and dance in a disorientating tango. Ollie stared with horror as the creature's bloodless neck snapped sideways as its head smashed into the concrete ceiling. She couldn't avert her gaze from its seething crimson eyes, for they peered into the depths of her terrified soul.

At last, the groaning crunch of its bones ceased and for a second an eerie stillness overtook the garage. Neither monster nor girl moved, and the world held its breath as time began to slow. The open fridge hummed, the cardboard boxes quivered, and the shadows plastered against the wall swayed with the yellow glow of the light. As if the air was made of liquid, the lamp slowly creaked as it swung... once towards the faceless eyes of the creature, and once towards the fearful ones of Ollie. It flickered, shrouding the garage with darkness for just a fraction of a second. But when the light returned, Ollie's heart sank as the monster's blackened

face opened up with a tear, revealing rows upon rows of sharp teeth peeking out behind a smile that stretched far beyond the corners of its face.

Ollie bolted. The stunned state that she had found herself in disappeared instantly. She'd seen enough. Stumbling to her feet, she sprinted towards the garage door. Realizing her escape, the monster gnashed its terrible teeth and pummeled after her, the sound of its cracking limbs slapping against the floor as it went. Tripping up the steps, Ollie fumbled with the door handle and threw herself inside. Quickly, she scrambled to lock the creature out. Grabbing the other side of the door, she looked out at the monster's agonized face lunging towards her, its eyes gleaming with anger and its mouth gaping open in preparation for a bite. Seconds before its razor-sharp teeth could close in for the kill, Ollie slammed the door and bolted it shut.

She took a deep sigh of relief and sunk towards the floor, her shaking legs unable to sustain her any longer. But the feeling of safety disappeared the moment it occurred, for a loud bang jolted her back to reality. The *thing* was trying to get in.

Pulling herself away from the doorframe, Ollie stared at the sheet of painted wood that stood in between her and the monster in the garage. *Boom!* Her heart jumped to her throat as the creature smashed into the door. *Boom!* Her body trembled with the whole house as it shook with the impact. *Boom!* Her mouth grew parched with fear as the door began to strain. *Boom! Boom! BOOM!* Ollie covered her ears and squeezed her eyes shut as her mind raced with a single thought that repeated over and over again: *You're gonna die. You're gonna die. You're gonna die. YOU'RE GONNA DIE! YOU. ARE. GOING. TO. DIE!*

"What's that noise?!" someone suddenly shouted. The disgruntled voice of her mother brought Ollie back to her senses. Looking upwards, she realized that the banging had stopped. Not sparing a second, she raced towards the living room.

"Mama, there's a monster outside!" she cried, "I can hear it through the door, it's trying to get in!" Never before had she felt so grateful to know that her mother was near. Never before had she been so eager to run into the living room. Picking her way through the darkness, Ollie

followed the flickering light of the TV and let the sound of laughter echo throughout the house as Ron cracked another joke.

“Mama,” she called, turning the corner to reach the living room, “we need something to block the door, and quickly too.”

“Did you get what I asked for?” Her mother asked, her voice dripping with disdain. Ollie froze as she reached the threshold, and her heart sank. In her frenzy to escape the garage, she’d forgotten about the reason why she went there in the first place. She forgot the “funny drink”. Looking into the darkened room, Ollie saw the silhouette of her mother wobbling in front of the TV. She’d left the comfort of her beloved recliner, and the white screen displaying Ronald’s plastered smile flashed against her back.

“Mama,” Ollie started, “there’s a monster-”

“Did you get what I *asked* for?” her mother asked again. This time her gaunt face twisted with growing rage. She could barely stand, and yet her menacing eyes locked onto Ollie with disgust.

“Mama I-”

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” she growled, “answer the question. Now.” Fidgeting in place, Ollie felt her face grow hot. She knew the consequences of defying orders, but regardless of her response, she was up for a beating. Taking a trembling breath, Ollie sighed and mentally prepared herself to respond.

“No,” she said quietly, fixing her vision on the ground. Her mother scoffed.

“Come here,” she demanded.

“But, mama there was a monster-”

“Come. Here.”

“Mama, you’re not listening! There’s a-” but Ollie’s voice was cut off by the sound of her mother kicking a pile of cans by her recliner in fit of rage. The empty cups scattered across the

floor and rolled over the stained carpet. As they came to a rest, their colorful bodies glimmered underneath the TV's light, and their shadows stretched outwards.

"Get your ass over here right now," Ollie's mother shouted, "or so help me I will make you wish you were never born!" Stumbling forward in a dizzying rage, the woman gripped the side of her reclining seat and glared forward.

Flinching, Ollie averted her gaze and stepped tentatively into the living room. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes as she forced her little feet to move forward. Walking across the spoiled carpet, she saw her drawing laying forgotten on the floor. The yellow crayon was nowhere in sight.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" her mother groaned as her child finally reached her. Ollie refused to look up. Her view of the floor grew blurry with hot tears, and she felt her heart aching with shame.

"I'm sorry," she said her voice barely above a whisper.

"What was that?"

"I'm sorry," Ollie repeated, louder this time. She felt her mother sneering down at her.

"Look at me," the woman taunted, causing a shiver to run down Ollie's spine. The poor girl knew what was coming next. If she looked up, the feeling of a callused palm would swoop down on her and leave a sharp sting against the side of her cheek. But if she refused, the punishment for her "crime" would be a whole lot worse.

Slowly, Ollie raised her tear-stricken face and looked into the eyes of the woman who raised her. Staring down, her mother never looked as shriveled and sunken as she did now. Her eyes drooped and bulged unnaturally against her pale skin, displaying dark rings that circled her lower lids. Her frazzled hair was stuck in tangled clumps atop her head, the roots greasy from the lack of care and showering. Worst of all, her black teeth were almost completely deteriorated with cavities, and an overbearing stench seeped from her sour breath. As Ollie stared into her mother's disheveled appearance, her eyes grew dull as she realized she could no longer recognize

the person standing before her. The only thing Ollie could see now was a skeleton... a skeleton in the shape of her mother.

The woman raised her hand in a gesture that Ollie remembered all too well. Squeezing her eyes shut, she held her breath and waited for the throbbing impact. In the distance, she heard Ronald crack another joke.

“This one’s for all of you lovely ladies back home!” he said, his bubbly voice starkly contrasting the current situation. “What do you call a mother who has a raging alcoholic addiction?”

Ollie twitched in her spot. *Ronald Laughs* was a pre-recorded compilation that she’d heard a thousand times over. Every quip, pun, gag, or one-liner that he’d had ever said held a place in Ollie’s memory until she could recite almost every line. And yet... and yet she’d never heard this one before.

“You guessed it!” Ronald continued, his voice echoing over the sounds of a cheering audience, “a fucking dead woman, that’s what!”

Snapping her eyes open, Ollie saw her mother’s hand come speeding downwards with full force, its trajectory right on target. But before Ollie could flinch, and before the pale digits could make contact with her face, her mother suddenly gasped. Looking downward, her mother stared at her chest, or rather, what was left of it.

A sharp spike protruded outwards, extending from the back of her body to the front. Her eyes grew wide, for she couldn’t believe what had happened to her.

“Wh- what is this?” the woman asked, her voice trembling as she reached her hands towards the object. Blood oozed from the wound, spurting outwards and dripping to the floor. Suddenly, she began coughing violently into her palms, coating them with a sickly red liquid. Raising a trembling fist to the light, she began to sob as the realization sunk in. “What is this?” the woman asked again, her raspy pain-filled breath growing faster as she spoke. The wound in her chest contracted with every raggedy intake and she grew pale with horror. Looking upward,

she noticed a throbbing red mass on the tip of the spike. “That’s...” she choked, shaking her head with disbelief as she stared at her own steaming heart that had been ripped from her body. With darting eyes, Ollie’s mother gazed into the face of her child who’d fallen to the floor in shock. “Save me,” she rasped, reaching a heavy hand forward in desperation. “Save... me...” The spike in her chest was ripped from her body, and she fell like a ragdoll onto the carpet.

Ollie couldn’t breathe. Her mouth hung open in shock as blood oozed from the lifeless corpse. Back into the depths of the shadows, the spike returned to its original body that hid in the darkness. Inching forward, the monster emerged, its black fur thoroughly soaked red. Looking towards its eyes, Ollie realized that they weren’t fixated on her like before. Instead, they trembled excitedly towards the sight of her mother. Slowly, the sound of ripping skin echoed through Ollie’s ears as the monster’s mouth expanded and revealed its shining white teeth as it did in the garage.

In a swoop, the creature pounced upon the body and sunk its teeth into the flesh. A horrible crunching sound came from the bones as it feasted without regard for what went into its mouth. Flesh, cartilage, and meat alike were swallowed by the starving monster, and through slurping gulps, it eagerly ripped Ollie’s mother apart. The dull, gray walls were splattered with red, and the stained carpet oozed with blood.

Sitting dumbfounded, Ollie stared at the mangled corpse being torn to pieces in front of her. As the monster gnashed its teeth, a splatter of blood smacked against her face yet she didn’t move to wipe it off. Looking to her right in a daze, she noticed her drawing laying on the floor. From the corner it oozed as the crimson liquid flowered across the paper, slowly staining the white dress she’d drawn on herself until it became a dull red. As Ollie stared at her ruined piece, the sound of laughter reached her ears. On the TV, a sea of joyous white faces smiled behind a splatter of blood dripping from the screen. Ronald’s audience shrieked and howled with laughter as if they’d heard the funniest joke in the world, and maybe they had.

Ollie glanced from the heaving body of the feasting monster, to the blood-soaked drawing of her perfect family, to the TV audience that wouldn't stop laughing, and at last to the unrecognizable corpse of her mother. As she soaked it all in, like the carpet soaked in the blood from the body, her head began to spin. Raising her face towards the ceiling, Ollie let out a pained laugh... then another... then another...and soon, her own voice synced with the voices from the TV and her shrieking laugh echoed throughout the night.

End.