

*Stain*

*By Marty Stuttman*

The faint humming filled my living room. It wasn't a very large living room, but it was large enough to take me a few minutes to find where it was coming from. At first I thought it was my fridge, which is in the attached kitchen, but as soon as I left the room I couldn't hear it anymore. The humming—no, it was more of a buzzing, similar to that of a fluorescent light, only deeper and more penetrating—would start and stop when I'd take a step into or out of the living room, respectively. I thought it could be some sort of motion detector, though I had never installed any such device, though it could be something left from the previous tenant. I couldn't find any such device; my best bet was to follow the sound to find the source. At first, I couldn't identify any one point of origin. I knew it wasn't tinnitus, as turning my head and moving around the room changed the volume of the sound, but as soon as I thought I was moving towards it, it would sound like it was coming from the other end of the room. I walked in circles for what felt like hours, making no progress and growing ever more irritated. I slumped down onto the sofa, my leg bouncing restlessly as the humming taunted me.

I clenched my jaw and moved my head frantically, darting my eyes across every surface of the room, desperate for an explanation. My gaze landed on the beat up TV I had gotten from Goodwill a few days prior. With my head positioned in its direction, the humming was noticeably emanating from it. My chest untightened, and with great relief I hustled over and pulled the TV's plug from the surge protector. The humming didn't stop. Baffled, I pulled the TV away from the wall to check the back of it for any indication it still, somehow, had power. Doing this revealed a stain on the wall; it was perfectly circular, about a foot in diameter, and a pale yellow color. Compared to the eggshell of the wall, it would be easy to miss, but I was certain it was new, as I would have noticed it when I moved in the month prior. I didn't want to touch it, but I felt a faint warmth as I got close to it.

The most notable aspect of this stain was, without a doubt, that the sound was coming from it.

My frustration became worry, as I imagined what sort of structural mishap could cause such a phenomenon. A pipe leak? Faulty wiring? Termites? All of the above? I rushed to the phone in the kitchen to call my landlord. I had only known him for a month, and from the few conversations we had I'd come to disdain the man. Calling them "Conversations" is actually an overstatement, as he'd take just about any opportunity to interrupt me with either a belittling joke or an unrelated anecdote about whatever reality TV show he was missing. Suffice to say, I didn't want to call him, but I didn't know what else to do. After four or five rings, he picked up.

"What is it?" he grunted.

"There's this big stain on the wall in the living room—"

"You spill somethin'?"

"No, it's something coming from the wall, there's also this humming, or it's more like buzzing coming from—"

"You try wipin' it off?"

"Well, no, but—"

Try windex that might do it."

"Ok, but I think the bigger issue is—"

"Huh?"

"I said the bigger issue is that something's making noise in the wall, I'd appreciate it if you could check it out or send someone—"

The landlord sighed, "Alright alright, I'll swing by later." He then murmured something inaudible, coughed, and hung up.

I checked under the kitchen sink and found a bottle of all-purpose cleaner. I grabbed it, some dish soap, and a roll of paper towels. I took my supplies back to the stain and sprayed it with the cleaner. I saw it come out of the nozzle, but it didn't look like there was anything on the stain. I sprayed again. Still, nothing was landing on the stain. I furrowed my brow, tore off a couple paper towels, and sprayed them. I wiped the wet wad across the wall over the stain, confident that at

least some of it would clear up. The stain remained exactly as it was, in fact the only change was that the paper towels somehow became significantly drier. I tried again with the dish soap, and was met with similar results. Frustrated, I opened the dish soap and poured it onto the wall above the stain. Streams of blue liquid raced downward toward the discolored circle, but once it oozed onto the surface of the stain, the soap disappeared, like water on a hot sidewalk. Well, not exactly, as the soap wasn't evaporating, it simply disappeared, as if it had been absorbed into the wall. Exasperated, I went back to the cupboard to look for something—anything—that I could use against the stain. I found one of the flat metal scraper things, and considered scraping the paint off the wall, but behind I saw a hammer and some nails. I thought to myself, if nothing was getting through the stain, surely a nail would. Well, that thought was more to justify my initial urge to stab a nail through the stain because it was angering me; I wasn't really thinking logically at this point.

With my left hand, I placed the nail over the center of the stain; with my right, I fidgeted with the hammer before finding a comfortable grip. I brought the hammer's head up to the nail, pulled back, and swung. In one swift motion, the nail was lodged in the wall. The stain, however, was now a centimeter above the nail. My eyes widened. I didn't see it move, and I didn't move the nail from the center, but somehow I ended up missing entirely. Despite there being a hole in the wall, the humming wasn't any louder. I flipped around the hammer, pulled out the nail, and lined it up again, only now it felt too high up to comfortably bash it. I pulled a small footstool out from under the coffee table and set it in place under the stain. I stepped up, and with this higher point of view, I felt a surge of confidence; I was gonna get that stain. I lined up the nail and gripped the handle of the hammer tightly. As I swung the hammer the second time, the stain shot out from under the nail and moved—yes, moved—across the wall to the other end of the room. In shock, I missed the nail, instead hitting my left hand, before stumbling over my feet, simultaneously losing my grip of the hammer and falling backwards off of the stool, and banging the side of my head on the edge of the coffee table.

I don't know how long I was out, but my awakening was paired with the taste of iron and a shooting pain in my mouth and head. As my eyes focused, I could see, suspended mid-air in front of my face, small red orbs. They moved at a slow, constant speed, originating from my mouth. These were beads of blood, my blood, defying gravity before me. I was sure I was dreaming, or at least hallucinating. I followed the path of the red droplets; I could tell that they were traveling away from me, but my vision was still hazy. I concentrated and squinted my eyes, and as my surroundings became clear, I could see that the blood was going into the stain. As soon as I looked at it, the droplets fell from suspension, leaving a speckled line of blood on the living room floor. I brought myself to my feet, my whole body trembling. None of this made sense, seeing what I just saw was too much for me to be able to process. I shuffled to the bathroom, unthinking, and looked in the mirror. One of my bottom molars was gone, all the blood was coming from the hollow cavity in my gum. I wadded up some toilet paper and plugged the hole with it, after which I used more toilet paper to wipe my face and hands. I couldn't have been unconscious for too long, as all the blood was still wet. I cupped my hands under the faucet, filling them with cold water. I plunged my face into it, the freezing water bringing me to a state of more coherent thought. I lifted my head to look at myself in the mirror. This was all too real to be a dream, and too surreal to be real. Having left the door open, I could see the living room through the mirror. I saw the wall behind me, and I didn't see the stain. My attention was taken by the wads of bloodied toilet paper in the sink. They seemed to be vibrating. I looked up at the mirror once again, and my heart plunged into my gut as I saw the discolored circle slowly slide into my view of the wall behind me. The vibrating clumps of red and white in the sink slowly floated into the air, their motion almost hypnotically natural, like fallen leaves being whisked away by a flowing stream. I turned around to look directly at the stain, and the clumps fell to the ground. I locked my eyes onto the circle. It was real. I wasn't imagining it. I couldn't be. I walked out of the bathroom towards it, and diverted my line of sight to the blood on the floor. There was less of it than before, I was sure of it. I felt something wet graze the back of my head, causing

me to shiver. I jumped away from it and spun around, only to see the wads of toilet paper drifting through the air. I looked at the stain, and they fell again. I looked back at the clumps, and they started flying again. I quickly looked away and back at the stain, back and forth, which seemed to cause the clumps to hover, fall, then float back up before hitting the ground. I was beyond the point of rational thought; I knew nothing could explain what I was seeing. All I could do now was observe. I watched as one wad of paper reached the stain; it frictionlessly collided and passed through the wall, disappearing into the circle, leaving a briefly glowing afterimage where it made contact. I grabbed One of the other clumps from the air, and held it out towards the stain. I was standing about 6 feet from it at this point, and could feel a slight pull on the clump, which disappeared whenever I'd look directly at the stain. Keeping my eyes focused on the wall just next to the stain, I slowly walked forward, the pull growing with each step I took. I stopped moving when my hand was a foot in front of the stain. It felt like I was holding a piece of metal in front of a powerful magnet. I looked right at the stain, expecting the pull to dissipate, but this time, something was different. The humming sound, which I had all but forgotten about at this point, quickly grew in volume to more of a growl, and the pull became even stronger. I tightened my grip as I kept looking at it, my terror being overpowered by my morbid curiosity.

The surface of the stain started to warp as something faintly glowing began to protrude out from under it, like a finger pushing against a balloon, the growling growing even louder and the pull even stronger. It became too strong for me, and the clump of bloody toilet paper was ripped from my grasp, disappearing into the stain. As soon as it was gone, the growling turned back into a hum, and the glowing protrusion receded away. This stain, circle, this thing, was alive, and it was hungry. I didn't want it to be angry. I pulled the tooth plug from my gum and held it out in an open palm, offering it to the stain. It slowly lifted out of my hand.

“That’s it... I’m not your enem—”

The doorbell rang, causing me to jump. The stain seemed to do the same, moving quickly away from the sound, as if frightened. The doorbell rang again, then again and again in rapid succession. The stain moved further away from the door, now vibrating in the corner behind the TV. The doorbell continued ringing until I unlocked the door. I didn't even have my hand on the knob before my landlord pushed open the door and promptly stomped into my apartment.

"Jesus, what a dump!" he quipped, before turning to look at me. "Holy hell, you look terrible! More than usual!" He let out a deep chuckle. "No offense, though, heh. So, uh, what the hell happened to you?"

"I—"

"You know what? I don't even wanna know what kinda shit you get up to. So, where's the smell?"

"Stain."

"Stain, smell, same difference!" He turned and walked into the living room, stopping on top of the rug. "Is that the stain?" He gestured towards the blood on the floor.

I looked around for the stain. "No, it's, uh, well—"

"Duh, uhm, uh, duh, that's what you sound like!" the landlord blurted out. "No offense though, pal. Look, if this crap stains the hardwood, I'm takin' it outta your deposit, capiche?"

I kept looking for the stain. "It was here... then there... it's around here somewhere..."

"Buddy, you hearin' yourself? A moving stain? Sheesh, I never pegged you for a genius, but you're makin' less sense than usual. Look, if you're wastin' my valuable time with this, then that's comin' out of your deposit, too. Can't believe I'm missing storage wars for this. Unbelievable. Look at this shithole, I mean what kinda..."

Beneath him, I saw the stain slowly slide out from under the rug. The landlord didn't notice, he was still busy listening to himself complain. At first, the stain didn't do anything. It didn't have a face, but, somehow, I could tell it was looking at me, waiting for something. I looked up at the landlord, then back down

at the stain, and I understood. I didn't quite know what to expect, but in that moment I felt more kinship with the discoloration on my floor than the man standing in front of me. I smiled slightly, and nodded my head in approval. The moment I did this, the humming grew to a roar. The landlord screamed something, but I couldn't hear it over the roaring. He looked down at the stain in horror just as the glowing protrusion emerged from the stain. He tried to move his legs, but his feet were being enveloped by the protrusion. He couldn't do anything other than fall to the ground. As the protrusion further grew, the stain became smaller and smaller, until suddenly, a glowing ball of light—about a foot in diameter—fully emerged. It moved across the landlord's body, starting at his legs. I couldn't hear his screams, but his face was an expression unlike anything I've ever seen, his mouth agape and his eyes so wide they could've fallen out of his head, looking in horror as the orb devoured him from the bottom up. The last part of him was his hand, reaching toward me.

When the orb was done feeding, there was nothing left of him. The roaring subsided, and the orb drifted down to the floor, slowly easing back into its original form. It began moving across the floor, eating up all the leftover blood, now emanating a satisfied purr, before calmly returning to its spot behind the TV. I noticed that, despite what I had seen, I was still smiling.

That was two months ago. A police officer was here earlier today asking all of us tenants if we knew anything about our beloved landlord. Apparently he hasn't been seen in quite some time. I told the officer I didn't know anything about all that. He then asked what I was doing on a certain night two months ago, and why I was smiling. I answered him honestly.

“Sorry, I was just thinking of something funny my pet did that night. Say, you wanna meet him?”