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I'LL KILL YOU TOMORROW

It was not a sinister silence. No silence is sinister until it acquires a background of understandable menace. Here there was only the night quiet of Maternity, the silence of noiseless rubber heels on the hospital corridor floor, the faint brush of starched white skirts brushing through doorways into darkened and semi-darkened rooms.

But there was something wrong with the silence in the "basket room" of Maternity, the glass-walled room containing row on row, the tiny hopes of tomorrow. The curtain was drawn across the window through which, during visiting hours, peered the proud fathers who did the hoping. The night-light was dim.

The silence should not have been there.

Lorry Kane, standing in the doorway, looked out over the rows of silent baskets and felt her blonde hair tighten at the roots. The tightening came from instinct, even before her brain had a chance to function, from the instincts and training of a registered nurse.

Thirty-odd babies grouped in one room and—*complete silence*.

Not a single whimper. Not one tiny cry of protest against the annoying phenomenon of birth.

Thirty babies—*dead*? That was the thought that flashed, unbidden, into Lorry's pretty head. The absurdity of it followed swiftly, and Lorry moved on rubber soles between a line of baskets. She bent down and explored with practiced fingers.

A warm, living bundle in a white basket.

The feeling of relief was genuine. Relief, even from an absurdity, is a welcome thing. Lorry smiled and bent closer.

Staring up at Lorry from the basket were two clear blue eyes. Two eyes, steady and fixed in a round baby face. An immobile, pink baby face housing two blue eyes that stared up into Lorry's with a quiet concentration that was chilling.

Lorry said, "What's the matter with you?" She spoke in a whisper and was addressing herself. She'd gone short on sleep lately—the only way, really, to get a few hours with Pete. Pete was an interne at General Hospital, and the kind of a homely grinning carrot-top a girl like Lorry could put into dreams as the center of a satisfactory future.

But all this didn't justify a case of jitters in the "basket room."

Lorry said. "Hi, short stuff," and lifted Baby Newcomb—Male, out of his crib for a cuddling.

Baby Newcomb didn't object. The blue eyes came closer. The week-old eyes with the hundred-year-old look. Lorry laid the bundle over her shoulder and smiled into the dimness.

"You want to be president, Shorty?" Lorry felt the warmth of a new life, felt the little body wriggle in snug contentment. "I wouldn't advise it. Tough job." Baby Newcomb twisted in his blanket. Lorry stiffened.

Snug contentment?

Lorry felt two tiny hands clutch and dig into her throat. Not just pawing baby hands. Little fingers that reached and explored for the windpipe.

She uncuddled the soft bundle, held it out. There were the eyes. She chilled. No imagination here. No spectre from lack of sleep.

Ancient murder-hatred glowing in new-born eyes.

"Careful, you fool! You'll drop this body." A thin piping voice. A shrill symphony in malevolence.

Fear weakened Lorry. She found a chair and sat down. She held the boy baby in her hands. Training would not allow her to drop Baby Newcomb. Even if she had fainted, she would not have let go.

The shrill voice: "It was stupid of me. Very stupid."

Lorry was cold, sick, mute.

"Very stupid. These hands are too fragile. There are no muscles in the arms. I couldn't have killed you."

"Please—I ..."

"Dreaming? No. I'm surprised at—well, at your surprise. You have a trained mind. You should have learned, long ago, to trust your senses."

"I don't understand."

"Don't look at the doorway. Nobody's coming in. Look at me. Give me a little attention and I'll explain."

"Explain?" Lorry pulled her eyes down to the cherubic little face as she parroted dully.

"I'll begin by reminding you that there are more things in existence than your obscene medical books tell you about."

"Who are you? What are you?"

"One of those things."

"You're not a baby!"

"Of course not. I'm ..." The beastly, brittle voice drifted into silence as though halted by an intruding thought. Then the thought voiced—voiced with a yearning at once pathetic and terrible: "It would be nice to kill you. Someday I will. Someday I'll kill you if I can find you."

"Why? Why?" Insane words in an insane world. But life had not stopped even though madness had taken over. "Why?"

The voice was matter-of-fact again. No more time for pleasant daydreams. "I'm something your books didn't tell you about. Naturally you're bewildered. Did you ever hear of a bodyless entity?"

Lorry shuddered in silence.

"You've heard of bodyless entities, of course—but you denied their existence in your smug world of precise tidy detail. I'm a bodyless entity. I'm one of a swarm. We come from a dimension your mind wouldn't accept even if I explained it, so I'll save words. We of the swarm seek unfoldment—fulfillment—even as you in your stupid, blind world. Do you want to hear more?"

"I ..."

"You're a fool, but I enjoy practicing with these new vocal chords, just as I enjoyed flexing the fingers and muscles. That's why I revealed myself. We are, basically of course, parasites. In the dimension where we exist in profusion, evolution has provided for us. There, we seek out and move into a dimensional entity far more intelligent than yourself. We destroy it in a way you wouldn't understand, and it is not important that you should. In fact, I can't see what importance there is in your existing at all."

"You plan to—kill all these babies?"

"Let me congratulate you. You've finally managed to voice an intelligent question. The answer is, no. We aren't strong enough to kill them. We dwelt in a far more delicate dimension than this one and all was in proportion. That was our difficulty when we came here. We could find no entities weak enough to take possession of until we came upon this roomful of infants."

"Then, if you're helpless ..."

"What do we plan to do? That's quite simple. These material entities will grow. We will remain attached—ingrained, so to speak. When the bodies enlarge sufficiently ..."

"*Thirty potential assassins....*" Lorry spoke again to herself, then hurled the words back into her own mind as her sickness deepened.

The shrill chirping: "What do you mean, potential? The word expresses a doubt. Here there is none." The entity's chuckle sounded like a baby, content over a full bottle. "Thirty certain assassins."

"But why must you kill?"

Lorry was sure the tiny shoulders shrugged. "Why? I don't know. I never thought to wonder. Why must you join with a man and propagate some day? Why do you feel sorry for what you term an unfortunate? Explain your instincts and I'll explain mine."

Lorry felt herself rising. Stiffly, she put Baby Newcomb back into his basket. As she did so, a ripple of shrill, jerky laughter crackled through the room. Lorry put her hands to her ears. "You know I can't say anything. You'd keep quiet. They'd call me mad."

"Precisely."

Malicious laughter, like driven sleet, cut into her ears as she fled from the room.

Peter Larchmont, M.D., was smoking a quick cigarette by an open fire-escape door on the third floor. He turned as Lorry came down the corridor, flipped his cigarette down into the alley and grinned. "Women shouldn't float on rubber heels," he said. "A man should have warning."

Lorry came close. "Kiss me. Kiss me—hard."

Pete kissed her, then held her away. "You're trembling. Anticipation, pet?" He looked into her face and the grin faded. "Lorry, what is it?"

"Pete—Pete. I'm crazy. I've gone mad. Hold me."

He could have laughed, but he had looked closely into her eyes and he was a doctor. He didn't laugh. "Tell me. Just stand here. I'll hang onto you and you tell me."

"The babies—they've gone mad." She clung to him. "Not exactly that. Something's taken them over. Something terrible. Oh, Pete! Nobody would believe me."

"I believe the end result," he said, quietly. "That's what I'm for, angel. When you shake like this I'll always believe. But I'll have to know more. And I'll hunt for an answer."

"There isn't any answer, Pete. I *know*."

"We'll still look. Tell me more, first."

"There isn't any more." Her eyes widened as she stared into his with the shock of a new thought. "Oh, Lord! One of them talked to me, but maybe he—or it—won't talk to you. Then you'll never know for sure! You'll think I'm ..."

"Stop it. Quit predicting what I'll do. Let's go to the nursery."

They went to the nursery and stayed there for three-quarters of an hour. They left with the tinny laughter filling their minds—and the last words of the monstrous entity.

"We'll say no more, of course. Perhaps even this incident has been indiscreet. But it's in the form of a celebration. Never before has a whole swarm gotten through. Only a single entity on rare occasions."

Pete leaned against the corridor wall and wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket. "We're the only ones who know," he said.

"Or ever will know." Lorry pushed back a lock of his curly hair. She wanted to kiss him, but this didn't seem to be the place or the time.

"We can never tell anyone."

"We'd look foolish."

"We've got a horror on our hands and we can't pass it on."

"What are we going to do?" Lorry asked.

"I don't know. Let's recap a little. Got a cigarette?"

They went to the fire door and dragged long and deep on two from Lorry's pack. "They'll be quiet from now on. No more talking—just baby squalls."

"And thirty little assassins will go into thirty homes," Lorry said. "All dressed in soft pink and blue, all filled with hatred. Waiting, biding their time, growing more clever." She shuddered.

"The electric chair will get them all, eventually."

"But how many will they get in the meantime?"

Pete put his arms around her and drew her close and whispered into her ear. "There's nothing we can do—nothing."

"We've got to do something." Lorry heard again the thin, brittle laughter following her, taunting her.

"It was a bad dream. It didn't happen. We'll just have to sleep it off."

She put her cheek against his. The rising stubble of his beard scratched her face. She was grateful for the rough touch of solid reality.

Pete said, "The shock will wear out of our minds. Time will pass. After a while, we won't believe it ourselves."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"It's got to be that way."

"We've got to do something."

Pete lowered his arm wearily. "Yeah—we've got to do something. Where there's nothing that can be done. What are we—miracle workers?"

"We've got to do something."

"Sure—finish out the watch and then get some sleep."

Lorry awoke with the lowering sun in her window. It was a blood red sun. She picked up the phone by her bedside. "Room 307 Resident's extension."

Pete answered drowsily. Lorry said, "Tell me—did I dream, or did it really happen."

"I was going to ask you the same thing. I guess it happened. What are you doing?"

"Lying in bed."

"So am I. But two different beds. Things are done all wrong."

"Want to take a chance and sneak over? I've got an illegal coffee pot."

"Leave the door unlocked."

Lorry put on the coffee. She showered and got into her slip. She was brushing her hair when Pete came in. He looked at her and extended beckoning, clutching fingers. "The hell with phantoms. Come here."

After a couple of minutes, Lorry pulled away and poured the coffee. She reached for her uniform. Pete said, "Don't put it on yet."

"Too dangerous—leaving it off."

He eyed her dreamily. "I'll dredge up will power. I'll also get scads of fat rich clients. Then we'll get married so I can assault you legally."

Lorry studied him. "You're not even listening to yourself. What is it, Pete? What have you dreamed up?"

"Okay. I've got an idea. You said something would have to be done."

"What?"

"A drastic cure for a drastic case. With maybe disaster as the end product."

"Tell me."

"I'll tell you a little, but not too much."

"Why not all?"

"Because if we ever land in court. I want you to be able to say under oath, 'He didn't tell me what he planned to do.'"

"I don't like that."

"I don't care if you like it or not. Tell me, what's the one basic thing that stands out in your mind about these—entities?"

"That they're ..."

"Fragile?"

"Yes—fragile."

"Give me some more coffee."

Lorry demanded to know what was in Pete's mind. All she got was kissed, and she did not see Pete again until eleven o'clock that night. He found her in the corridor in Maternity and motioned her toward the nursery. He carried a tray under a white towel. He said, "You watch the door. I'm going inside. I'll be about a half an hour."

"What are you going to do?"

"You stay out here and mind your business. Your business will be to steer any nosey party away. If you can't, make noise coming in."

Doc Pete turned away and entered the nursery. Lorry stood at the doorway, in the silence, under the brooding night-light, and prayed.

Twenty-five minutes later, Pete came out. His face was white and drawn. He looked like a man who had lately had a preview of Hell's inverted pleasures. His hands trembled. The towel still covered the tray. He said, "Watch them close. Don't move ten steps from here." He started away—turned back. "All hell is scheduled to break loose in this hospital shortly. Let's hope God remains in charge."

Lorry saw the sick dread of his heart underneath his words.

It could have been a major scandal. An epidemic of measles on the maternity floor of a modern hospital indicates the unforgivable medical sin—carelessness. It was hushed up as much as possible, pending the time when the top people could shake off the shock and recover their wits. The ultimate recovery of thirty babies was a tribute to everyone concerned.

Wan, done-in, Doc Pete drank coffee in Lorry's room. Lorry gave him three lumps of sugar and said, "But are you sure the sickness killed the entities?"

"Quite sure. Somehow they *knew* when I made the injections. They screamed. They knew they were done for."

"It took courage. Tell me: why are you so strong, so brave? Why are you so wonderful?"

"Cut it out. I was scared stiff. If *one* baby had died, I'd have gone through life weighing the cure against the end. It isn't easy to risk doing murder—however urgent the need."

She leaned across and kissed him. "And you were all alone. You wouldn't let me help. Was that fair?"

He grinned, then sobered. "But I can't help remembering what that—that invisible monster said: '*Never before has a whole swarm gotten through. Only a single entity on rare occasions.*'"

"I can't help wondering what happens to those single entities. I think of the newspaper headlines I've seen: Child Kills Parents in Sleep. Youth Slays Father. I'll probably always wonder—and I'll always remember...."

Lorry got up and crossed to him and put her arms around him. "Not always," she whispered. "There will be times when I'll make you forget. For a little while, anyhow."

THE END



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