

Harold's Defender

BY NORMAN THOMAS HOOD

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The driver left the old man's suitcase near the front gate and drove away. Harold picked it up and stared at the building behind the iron bars. It was nice enough, he figured; an old tuberculosis sanatorium from the early 1900's, now serving as a nursing facility. He had recently been asked to leave the rest home he had grown to love. Whispering Hills would be his new home now.

The courtyard was classically adorned. Several nineteenth-century statues loomed over the entrance's stone walkway. They were the large, foreboding kind, whose eyes seemed to follow you as you passed. Harold noticed several residents meandering about in the courtyard's lush gardens. The north garden was bursting with an abundance of vegetables, while the south showcased a plethora of exotic florals.

This would be Harold's third place of residence in seven years. His eighty-eighth birthday had just passed, though he got around like a man in his seventies.

He stepped forward to the gate's speaker and gently pushed the talk button. A woman's voice answered, politely requesting his name. Soon, Harold heard a loud buzzing sound. The gates unlocked and drifted open several feet. Harold walked toward the front of the building while several residents looked on. Some pointed at him, some waved and some were not so friendly in their greetings. A nurse and administrator met him at the door. A young attendant stepped out from behind them and took his bag. The head of the facility extended his hand to Harold and smiled.

“Mr. Miller! I’m Daniel Simpson, Whispering Hill’s chief administrator. Welcome to our home. We’re excited to have you! This is Ms. Grisby, our head nurse.”

Harold shook both their hands, then the hand of the attendant as well, surprising the man. A fourth person also joined his welcoming committee. She paused before speaking, trying to catch her breath.

“And I’m Millie, Ms. Grisby’s lead nursing assistant. I’ll be showing you to your room and helping you get settled.”

She whispered to Ms. Grisby, “Sorry I’m late. I had a *Don* situation in the game room.”

“Steven will assist you with your luggage, Mr. Miller. Do you have any others besides this one?” Mr. Simpson asked.

“N-no sir, this is all I have,” Harold replied. “Eddie d-d-doesn’t have any luggage.”

“Eddie?” Millie asked, looking around.

Mr. Simpson quickly interjected. “Yes, Millie... Eddie. We’ll discuss him later.”

“It’s just that Mr. Miller’s room is a single, sir. I wasn’t aware---”

“We’ll discuss it *later*, Ms. Johnson,” he repeated.

“Eddie doesn’t n-n-need a bed, Ms. Millie. He prefers to stand in the corner at night. But, thank you for asking,” Harold said.

The young nursing assistant appeared thoroughly confused now, but abided by Mr. Simpson’s words and abandoned her questioning.

“Well, then,” Ms. Grisby said, “let’s get Mr. Miller situated. I hope you’ll enjoy your time with us, Harold. We’re at your disposal. You can speak to Millie or anyone on staff if you need something or have any concerns.”

Millie led Harold to his new room. The young attendant followed them inside and left Harold’s suitcase next to his bed. Millie turned on the lights and showed Harold around his new room.

“We have internet access if you want to get online, Mr. Miller. The username and password are listed on an index card inside your nightstand.

“Our linens are collected weekly, but we have a rolling hamper for you as well. Just call the lobby and set it outside your door whenever you want it picked up. If it gets too heavy, we’ll come in and get it for you.

"We have a wonderful activities director here, and lots of things going on to keep you as busy as you want to be. Arts and crafts teachers, a fitness instructor and a wonderful game room. Many of our residents like to play cards and board games. Oh, and if you're into gardening, we have several for you to work in.

"We eat dinner in the cafeteria at 5pm, though we can have it brought to your room if you'd rather. Breakfast starts at 7am and lunch is at noon. Any questions?"

"What's an internet? Is it something I have t-t-to do?" Harold asked.

"No, no. It's just... well, it's for anyone who wants to look at webpages or send emails."

Harold seemed confused. "Is it like a computer?"

"Yes, kind of. You use a computer or phone to access it. It doesn't sound like it's something we need to worry about, though."

Harold glanced to his right and laughed. "Eddie said I'm t-t-too damn old to worry about it. You'll have to excuse his mouth. He thinks he's a c-c-comedian sometimes."

"Eddie's his name?" Millie asked, beginning to understand.

"Yes, he says his name is old and too hard to p-p-pronounce, so he told me to call him Eddie. I'm s-s-sorry for my stutter. It's a nervous thing. Eddie's the only one I d-d-don't stutter around."

"Has Eddie been with you long?" she asked.

"A long t-t-time. He came about the time my son d--d-died. He's my best friend... my defender."

"Oh... I understand. Well, it's good to have friends that watch your back. I'm sure you'll make some new ones here, too."

"I hope so," he said. "Thank you, M-M-Millie." He held out his hand.

She stepped forward and cupped it in hers.

"My pleasure, Harold. My grandfather's name was Harold, too, by the way, on my mom's side. You don't hear that name too often anymore."

Harold looked to his right again and shook his head.

"Eddie said I'm a dying breed."

"Well, I prefer to say *unique*. Have a good afternoon, Harold. If you need anything while you're getting settled in, or have any questions, just pick up the

phone and push the *star* button. The front desk will answer, and you can ask for me.”

As she left the room, Harold sat on the bed, looking over his new habitat.

“I like her, too, Eddie. She seems sweet. ----- What? ----- Eddie! Why do you have to talk so dirty?”

Harold unloaded his suitcase and put his clothes away. It was almost dinner time.

The cafeteria was the hubbub of activity at Whispering Hills, even more so than the game room. The noise level was surprisingly high for a clientele of such advanced age. Harold nervously entered and sat down near the back of the room. Several workers in white jackets rolled meal carts around the room. One of them eventually found his way to Harold.

“Water, tea or lemonade?” a man asked.

“D-Do you have any hot coffee?” Harold asked.

“Oh, you one of *those*, huh? Drinkin’ coffee *all* the damn day? Lots of folks in here like that. Ain’t good for the stomach. What’s your name, little man?”

“Harold... Harold M-M-Miller.”

“Okay, Harold. I’m Gerald. Been here well over twenty years now! Glad to meet you.” He shook Harold’s hand. “I’ll get you some of that coffee now. You be needin’ anything with it?”

“No, j-just black.”

“One black coffee coming up. And here’s your dinner. We got chicken and dumplin’s tonight. You want apple pie with that or cake?”

“A-A-Apple pie, please.”

Harold heard a man laugh out loud. Gerald glanced over his shoulder before placing Harold’s food on the table.

“A-A—Apple p-p—pie, p-p-p-p—please! The man said, laughing even louder now.

“Don’t pay attention to old Don over there. He’s a real smartass... thinks he runs the place. He’s just trying to get your goat, Mr. Miller.”

“Eddie says he b-b-better watch his m-mouth or he’ll fill it with something.”

“Who said that?” Gerald asked. The overhead lights began to flicker.

Before Harold could answer him, Don suddenly stood from his chair with his hands clutching his throat. His mouth was gaped open wide and he appeared to be choking!

One of the servers rushed over and tried to perform the Heimlich maneuver. He had trouble locking his hands around Don's formidable belly. Everyone watched as he quickly jerked his arms inward and upward, trying his best to dislodge the food. When it was apparent he wasn't successful, he tried again, this time with more force. Still, nothing happened. Don's face was almost blood-red now as the server prepared himself for another attempt. With a loud grunt, the man used all his remaining strength. Suddenly, a throatful of chicken sailed out of Don's mouth, hitting another diner across the forehead! Don slumped over and had to be kept from falling to the floor, along with the tired server behind him. Several residents helped get him into his seat. Many gathered around to make sure he was okay before a nursing crew arrived to take him for observation.

Harold stood and yelled across the shocked cafeteria.

“Eddie! You shouldn't have done that to him! You should apologize before he leaves.”

The confusion over Harold's strange outburst was evident on the faces of everyone there, Gerald being no exception. He nodded suspiciously at Harold and left to get his coffee from the kitchen. The evening's drama had run its course by the time he returned.

“Here you go, Mr. Miller. Black, just like you asked. Sorry it took so long.”

“C-C-Call me Harold. Thank you, and I'm sorry about Eddie. He has a really bad t-temper.”

“Who'd you say? Eddie?” Gerald asked.

“Yes, Eddie... he's my friend.”

Gerald looked around the room. “I don't think I know 'em. Is he over there, near Don's table?”

“No, he's right h-here.” Harold pointed to the empty seat next to him.

Gerald's eyes suddenly widened. “Aw, hell naw! Ain't dealing with *this* shit today!”

He backed away from the table and wasted no time getting back to the cafeteria. Harold noticed people were watching and heard some of them whispering.

"See? Look at the trouble you've caused me, Eddie. And on my first day, too!" Around the room, the murmuring continued.

The next two days passed with Harold having his meals sent to his room. He didn't favor the solitude, just the lack of ridicule.

"I hope you're happy, Eddie. You promised to behave yourself, but you let me down again!" ----- "Yes, of course I heard him! But that didn't give you the right to do that! You could have killed him!" ----- "What? Why would I thank you? They were just words, Eddie. He didn't hurt me, but you sure hurt him!"

Harold heard someone knocking on his door. He put down his fork and wiped his chin.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened and Millie walked inside. She was holding a small bowl.

"I have something for you, Harold. Banana pudding! They didn't have these ready when they brought your dinner. Is there some reason you're not eating in the cafeteria with everyone else? Are you feeling well?"

"I'm alright. I just thought it'd be b-b-better this way."

"Well, you won't make any friends like this, locked away in your room. Harold, I heard what happened to Don, but he choked on a piece of chicken. You had nothing to do with that."

"No, it was Eddie. And now, Gerald is afraid of me, too. Eddie never lets me have any friends!"

"Well, I'm your friend, Harold. And Gerald's a good friend of mine. I'll talk to him and let him know not to be afraid of you, okay? Listen, I'm helping out with the game room this month. Any way I can convince you to join us? We have a movie room, a pool table, and lots of board games. You name it, we've got it."

Harold thought for a second. "Do you have *The Landlord's Game*?" Harold asked. I used to p-play that one with my mother."

“Well, I *thought* we had every board game out there, Harold, but I haven’t heard of that one. I’ll have to check on it. If I can find the game, would you join us? I’d play it with you.”

“That’d be great! Eddie d-d-doesn’t think you’ll find it, though.”

“Oh, is that so?” She looked around the room.

“Well, Eddie, that sounds like a challenge!”

She winked at Harold and let herself out. Seconds later, he put down his bowl, visibly upset.

“No she didn’t, Eddie! Why would you even *think* that?” ----- “Well, I don’t care... it smells fine to me. There’s nothing wrong with it, and I *like* banana pudding. You can’t smell it, anyway!”

Whispering Hills hired a storyteller to visit the facility. Friday morning, Millie knocked on Harold’s door to tell him about it. He was watching TV. She walked in carrying a box.

“Told ya!” She looked past Harold. “What do you think of *that*, Eddie? Now Harold, I know it’s not the same title you gave me, but when I researched it, this one came up. It’s basically the same game, but *Parker Brothers* bought the rights for *The Landlord’s Game* in the 1930’s, then changed its name to *Monopoly*. We play this all the time around here. We have three sets, I think. Now you have to keep your promise and play it with me in the game room. You pick the afternoon, but I warn you, I play to win!”

“Wow, Millie. My mother’s game must have been p-p-pretty old!”

“Oh, it *had* to be. This version looks different from what you’d remember, but the game plays out the same. It’ll be fun. I can’t wait! So, just let me know when. I’ll leave this with you so you can get familiar with it. Oh, I almost forgot. We have a storyteller coming Friday afternoon. He’s really good. It lasts about an hour, in the green room. Wanna come listen? You can sit with me.”

“I don’t know. Eddie’s not much for stories,” he said.

“Well, he doesn’t have to go, then. Just come by yourself.”

“Eddie’s always by my s-s-side... ever since my son died. He keeps me company. He p-protects me.”

"Well, if you decide to come, let me know. Have a good night, Harold."

"Good night, Millie."

The moment she closed the door, the TV turned off, followed by the overhead light.

"Now why do you have to act like that, Eddie? She's just being nice. She didn't mean anything against you." ----- "Yes, I know she's pretty. No! You're not touching her, Eddie!" ----- "You're *not* doing that to her!"

Harold wore the nicer of his two ties and buttoned his shirt. He wanted to look respectable for Millie. The clock on the wall showed 2:50 pm. If he didn't hurry, he'd be late for the storytelling. He hurried to the green room and looked for Millie, not finding her.

Soon, the lights dimmed and a modest spotlight illuminated the stage. Harold was about to settle for a chair in the back when he saw Millie standing near the front. She had spotted him as well. She waved him forward, but Harold nervously refused, shaking his head 'no'. She waved again, more forcefully now. Harold noticed some people watching, so he reluctantly made his way to the front and sat down next to her.

"I almost gave up on you Harold. I'm so glad you came!"

"I like storytellers. That's all we h-had growing up. We never had any m-m-money for moving pictures."

A man in his sixties walked onto the stage. He was tall and wore a brown, suede jacket. His mustache was white and full, reminiscent of Mark Twain's. He spoke of his childhood, retelling accounts of boyish adventures and near misses with the law.

The man had a strong voice and a commanding presence. His stories were dramatic as well as humorous. The man strolled confidently across the stage as he spoke, knowing the audience was fully captivated by his anecdotes. The room filled with sounds of clapping at the end of each one of his tales.

Millie turned to see how her guest was enjoying the show. Harold was sitting with his head down, wringing his hands together. Millie put her hand over his to steady his fretting. Harold locked tearful eyes with the young woman.

"What's wrong Harold?" she whispered. "Aren't you enjoying the stories?"

"Eddie said the m-man is a liar... that he never d-d-did *any* of those things. He said if he doesn't shut his m-m-mouth, he's going to break his damn legs!"

The man next to Harold heard his comment and abandoned his chair to find another place to sit.

Millie whispered to him, "Harold, that's a *terrible* thing to say and it's not going to happen! I think tomorrow that you, Ms. Grisby and I need to have a discussion about this 'Eddie' of yours, Harold. He's not—"

Just then, the storyteller fell from a prop he'd been standing on. The wooden box flipped across the stage as the man tried his best to land upright. There was a terrible cracking sound when his feet hit the floor, as his legs folded inward at the knees. The man screamed in agony as his whole body folded frontwards before a horrified audience. Several residents fainted; some even vomited. Millie's jaw dropped open as several attendants rushed the stage to provide aid to the entertainer. Harold tugged her shirt sleeve as the man's loud screaming continued.

"I knew he would do it!" Harold cried, "Eddie d-didn't like him. I told you, Millie!"

The following week found Harold secluded in his room again. Word had gotten around about his remarks at the show, and rumors began to circulate throughout the facility.

Millie met with Ms. Grisby to discuss her growing concerns about Harold. They both agreed that psychiatric intervention was needed. Millie had a talk with Harold and tried to convince him to attend a session.

"The appointment would be for Tuesday morning at 10:30, Harold. It wouldn't interfere with your lunch. Let's just try it and see how it goes, okay?"

"Eddie's not g-g-g—gonna like it, Millie."

"Then we can ask him not to come, okay?"

"He's n-n-not going to like that, either."

"Well, we'll ask him very nicely... just for this session. Who knows? The doctor may want to talk to Eddie next time."

"Eddie only t-t-talks to me. I know y-you think I'm crazy, Millie, but I'm not. Eddie's real!"

"No one thinks you're crazy, Harold. We just want to see if there's a way we can help you, that's all. Please, just try one session... for me. No one will force you to go back if you don't like it."

"Okay, Millie. I'll do it for you, but Eddie's already throwing a fit over it."

"Then let him throw his fit, Harold. He's not the boss of you. You're an adult. You make your own decisions, remember?"

Tuesday morning arrived and Millie drove Harold to his appointment. After Millie parked the car, she and Harold walked to the main entrance of the office building. Harold stopped short of going in, worried something bad was going to happen. Millie assured him everything would be fine and escorted him inside.

They got signed in and eventually heard Harold's name called. The psychiatrist greeted them in the hall and asked Millie to wait in a chair just outside his door during Harold's session.

The two men entered the office together. Harold appeared nervous as he sat down across from the doctor.

"I'm Dr. Langford. It's nice to meet you today, Harold. Please, have a seat, and try to relax. It's just you and I together for the next hour or so. We're going to have a friendly chat, if that's okay with you. Do you feel ready to begin our conversation?"

"I g-g-guess so, doctor. I enjoy having g-good conversation."

"Great! Can we start out with you telling me a little about yourself? And if you don't mind, I'd like to use this little sound recorder while we talk. It will help me remember everything we've said today."

"Yes, s-s-sir. I was b-born in 1937. My mother had me at home. Her s-sister helped. We had a small farm, but d-dry weather left us little to eat or sell.

"My father sold off most of our land and went to work for a f-f-factory in town. He met a pretty lady there and left us with our m-m-mother. I quit going to school when I was twelve to help my mother work in the f-f-fields we used to own. It's okay though. I liked it b-better than school.

“When I was seventeen, I m-m-married my Betty. We had us a little boy. We n-n-named him George. Betty died six years l-l-later from pneumonia. I raised him the best I could but he wasn't n-n-nice to me when he got bigger. He stole money from me and t-ried to hurt me. That's when I first m-met Eddie. He p-p-protected me against George.

“One day, George came home from w-w-work and wasn't acting right. I asked him what was wrong and he g-got really m-m-mad at me. He hit me in the head with a bottle. That's when Eddie m-m-made him fall down. He was just trying to protect me, but George's n-n-neck got broken. I was really sad and told Eddie to go away. He w-wouldn't leave. He's b-been with me ever since. He said he's my d-d-defender and was assigned to p-p-protect me.”

Millie heard everything from her chair outside the office. She was disheartened by the kind of life Harold had lived. She knew no one at the facility would care or understand him the way he needed.

The doctor asked Harold more questions about his childhood, his father's absence and Eddie's presence. Harold did his best to answer, exposing a past that left Millie in tears. She took a moment to get a coffee from the lobby before returning to her seat. As she listened to more of the session, she heard how upset Harold sounded by some of the doctor's questions. After they finished talking, Dr. Langford had an assistant escort Harold to the front lobby before asking Millie to speak with him in his office.

“I assume you heard much of what we talked about, Ms. Johnson. Under HIPAA I'm allowed to share details of Harold's session with you to ensure the continuity of care. It's a little early for a detailed diagnosis, but I want you to know that imaginary friends are quite common in my field. Usually the cases involve young children, but some cases can crossover into adulthood. It's a type of coping mechanism, and not unusual for someone who's experienced the types of trauma Harold has. His case is only unique that this 'Eddie' of his manifested so late in adulthood. In other aspects, though, Harold's speech, common mannerisms and comprehension level don't indicate a more severe diagnosis. I'd like to see him again if we can arrange it.”

“Certainly, doctor. I appreciate your words, really. They've relieved me more than you know. It was just so unnerving, though... the situation I told you about

over the phone. Immediately after Harold said Eddie was going to break that man's legs, it actually happened!"

"A terrible coincidence, Ms. Johnson. The timing was as unfortunate as the event, though. It only bolstered Harold's belief in his delusion. But again... just a terrible coincidence. Let's see him again in two weeks. I believe that's what your program allows for?"

"Yes, that's perfect. I'll have our head nurse call to set the appointment. Thank you, doctor. We'll see you again soon!"

The car ride back to Whispering Hills was pleasant. September had arrived, bringing cooler temperatures with its announcement of Fall's appearance. Millie put the car's windows down.

"What did you think of Dr. Langford, Harold?"

"I l-liked him. He's a smart man. He t-told me he enjoyed our talk and w-wants me to come back soon."

"That's awesome, Harold! I'll get it set up for two weeks from now."

"Millie, can we go for a longer d-d-drive before we go back? I haven't been on a n-nice drive for a long time."

"Absolutely, Harold. I think we both deserve it."

Millie turned the radio on and found a station that played older music. She suggested Harold recline his seat to relax, but Harold refused. He spent the next hour sitting forward and looking out the open window, content in watching the scenery change.

Millie set up an afternoon for Harold and her to play *Monopoly* together. With a little coercion, she convinced two other residents to play as well. Harold showed up with the board game in hand, and the four sat down to play. Harold ended up winning the game, causing a smile to spread across his face.

"Wow, Harold... you really *can* smile! And it's a lovely one, too."

Harold managed to accept his win gracefully.

"It was more the dice than m-m-me," he said, "Eddie helped them fall right." Several eavesdroppers heard his claim. Don was seated one table over.

“Oh, hell, everyone! Better cover your knees!” he said. “Harold’s little gamblin’ b-b-b-buddy may go on a rampage again!” Laughter erupted in the room. Millie immediately stood from her chair.

“That’s enough, Don! Your hateful comments aren’t necessary *or* helpful!” she said loudly.

Don waved her off, but shut his mouth. The room’s lights began to flicker, causing everyone’s laughter to cease.

“Don’t listen to him, Harold. He’s a very unhappy man. Don’t let him ruin your day.”

“It’s okay, Millie. Eddie s-s-said Don has a weak heart. He won’t b-b-be bothering me much longer.”

“Harold! That’s horrible talk! You shouldn’t say things like that! It makes you no better than him!”

“Eddie said it, n-not me! He says you d-d-don’t believe in him, Millie. If you don’t believe in him, then you d-d-don’t believe in me, either!”

“That’s not true, Harold. I believe and care about you very much,” she said, trying to contain the situation.

“That’s not nice, Eddie!” Harold said, looking behind his chair. “She said she believes in me!” he turned to Millie and raised his eyes to meet hers. “Eddie said you’re g-gonna believe in him real soon, Millie.”

Millie decided to abstain from visiting Harold until she’d had a chance to speak with Dr. Langford again. Harold continued to take his meals in his room. Several residents met with Mr. Simpson and requested Harold be transferred. He called an emergency meeting with Ms. Grisby and Millie. When Millie arrived, the two had already been discussing Harold’s situation.

“Please sit down, Millie. Ms. Grisby was just explaining some of our residents’ concerns with Mr. Miller. He’s caused many here to feel unsafe. I’ve heard so myself. His assertions about this ‘Eddie’ of his are extremely disturbing. Some residents have told me he outright threatened Don Smithers,”

Grisby added her thoughts on the matter, "Some have even spread rumors that Harold is possessed, Millie. This has to stop! Have you gotten back with his doctor yet?"

"Yes, I left a message with his office. He hasn't returned my call yet. Listen, I realize it's not a good situation at the moment, but Harold is a very kind and gentle man. The doctor said his imaginary friend is just a coping mechanism for the way he's been treated his entire life. We've had a couple bad coincidences here, yes... but possessed?"

"We don't think he's possessed, Millie, but some residents *do*... and frankly, they're scared to death of him!" Simpson said.

"But there's really nothing to be scared about," Millie argued. "Let me talk to Harold and ask him not to mention Eddie again until we've met with doctor Langford again. I'm sure the doctor will have suggestions for us. Is that acceptable, Mr. Simpson? I really don't want him to be forced to leave. He's eighty-eight years old. Please, just let me talk to him first."

"Fine, you talk to him. Listen, I understand your compassion for him, Millie. On the surface, he's a sweet and kind man, but you have to realize that underneath, Harold is the *source* of this 'Eddie' character. He *is* Eddie! And you need to remember this: we have over a hundred residents that deserve the *same* consideration you advocate for Harold. I won't sacrifice those residents *and* our reputation for *one* disturbed man... understood?"

"Understood, sir," she said.

Millie left Simpson's office and headed straight for Harold's room. She knocked on the door, but got no answer. She knocked again, this time louder.

"Harold? Are you in there? It's Millie."

"Go away, Millie. I'm not supposed to t-t-talk to you anymore. Eddie said so."

"Harold, please! I *have* to talk to you. It's very important!"

"Eddie s-says ugly things about you, Millie. He said if I kept talking to you he would p-pay you a visit! I told him he'd better not! I like you. You're my only f-f-friend." ----- "Yes she is, Eddie!" ----- "She doesn't laugh at me! You're a liar, Eddie!" Millie heard a loud noise in the room.

Millie tried Harold's door. It was unlocked. She took a deep breath and walked into his living room.

"I'm so sorry, Harold, but I *have* to talk to you!"

Before he could answer, his eyes were drawn to the ceiling light above his head. The bulbs in the fixture were becoming brighter each second! He looked at Millie, who was standing directly beneath the fixture!

“Millie! Watch out!”

All at once, both bulbs in the fixture exploded, sending pieces of hot glass into Millie's hair and onto the floor! She shook her head frantically, trying to rid herself of the broken glass.

“See, Millie? He d-doesn't want me to t-t-talk to you!”

Millie stood in shock for a moment while getting her bearings. She stepped over the broken glass to reach Harold's nightstand, picked up his phone and dialed the front desk. Their line was busy. She waited a few seconds and tried again. This time a woman answered.

“It's Millie. I'm in 107. Is there an electrical issue going on in the B-wing? A light fixture just burst in Harold Miller's room... yes, room 107. Oh, really? Okay, thank you.”

She sat the phone down and picked another piece of glass from her hair.

“Harold, the front desk said Mrs. Antona just called them. The same thing happened in *her* room, next door to us. It even blew out her TV. So it's not *Eddie*, Harold... it's an electrical problem. Just a terrible coincidence! All of these things... just terrible coincidences! I can't explain them, but I know it's not Eddie. You can't keep attributing every bad thing that happens to him. That brings the guilt onto yourself, and you're not guilty of *any* of this!

“Please, Harold... the other residents are really becoming scared of you. You have to promise me you won't mention Eddie anymore. Promise me, Harold, or they're going to make you leave!”

Harold covered his face with his hands. “Eddie said you're really g-g-oing to get it now, Millie! Please stop talking about him! He d-doesn't like you!”

“Dammit, Harold! Just promise me... you won't mention him to anyone here... anymore! I'm trying my best to help you! Can't you see that?” She was in tears now.

“Okay... I promise, Millie. I won't s-s-say anything else about him in front of the others. I don't want to be sent away again. You're my friend, Millie. I'll stop Eddie from d-doing anything to you!”

Millie stood with her hand on his shoulder, thinking about everything he'd just said to her. Then an idea struck her.

"Yes, Harold, that's *exactly* right! That's the key! *You* can stop him, Harold! *You* have the power to stop him... only you. Promise me you'll tell him to leave you alone and never come back!"

"But he won't l-listen to me."

"Just promise me!"

"Okay... I will," he said. I p-p-promise."

Millie left the room exhausted, but hopeful now. She reasoned if Harold felt the responsibility to stop Eddie *himself*, he might actually rid himself of his own delusion!

Millie drove home from the facility thoroughly unnerved by the day's events. She thought of Dr. Langford and immediately checked her phone. She had a missed call from him and a voicemail waiting.

"Ms. Johnson, I've left two messages at your facility for you. We need to talk as soon as possible. I reviewed the audio recordings from my session with Mr. Miller and heard some things on it I'm unable to explain. There were comments... answers to questions I asked, but I didn't hear them during the session. It was only when listening to the recordings later did I discover these comments. They truly disturbed me! They weren't from Harold, but from someone or something else... an 'unknown source' is the only way I can describe it. I need to know if anyone beside you was in the hallway during our session, even momentarily. I made a copy of the audio segments I want you to listen to. and called Ms. Grisby for your email address. I sent them to you an hour ago. You may have to turn the volume up to hear what I'm referring to. Please listen to the clips and get back with me as soon as you can!"

Millie checked her email and found his message. He'd sent two attachments, both of them were sound clips. She turned up the volume on her computer speakers and sat down to listen.

Audio Clip 1 -

Dr. Langford: "How do you feel about Eddie, Harold? Does he scare you?"

Harold: "Sometimes. But he p-protects me... makes sure people don't hurt me or m-m-make fun of me."

Dr. Langford: "What if you didn't need Eddie to help you anymore? Would you like that?"

Harold: "Yes... but I d-don't think he'll ever go away. He says I'm stuck with him."

Dr. Langford: "What do you think it would take to make him go away?"

Unknown source: "More than you! (undistinguishable) ... limp dick piece of shit!"

Dr. Langford: "Harold, try your best to imagine him gone from your life. Now, what might make him go away?"

Unknown source: "Not you!"

Harold: "I... I don't know, d-d-doctor. He's really strong! He's stronger than anyone I've ever known. I c-can't do it... he wouldn't go away!"

Dr. Langford: "Okay Harold... I understand. Take a deep breath and relax your mind... just breathe. I'll give you a minute to calm down."

Audio Clip 2 -

Dr. Langford: "Harold, concerning Eddie... are you afraid he'd hurt you if we made him leave?"

Harold: "He'd hurt Millie. And he said he'd hurt you, too if you tried... but not me."

Dr. Langford: "How would Eddie hurt me, Harold?"

Unknown source: "I'll smash... into you! " (undistinguishable) "... your guts!"

Dr. Langford: "Harold? Please try to focus. Can you tell me how he'd hurt me?"

Harold: "He said he'd s-s-smash into you and s-stomp your insides! Please doctor. I don't want to t-t-talk about him anymore!"

-end of recording

Millie's hands shook as she played the clips again. This time she used headphones. The unknown voice sounded to be male. Its tone was low and gravelly, with an odd, unnatural cadence. The hateful, threatening words sent chills down Millie's spine!

Her thoughts raced as she wrestled all evening with what she'd heard. She knew there wasn't a natural explanation for the voice being on the doctor's recordings, but it was definitely there. Millie knew there was no one else in the hallway during the doctor's session, and it certainly wasn't Harold's voice.

Millie pulled into Whispering Hills' parking lot the next morning and saw an ambulance idling near the east entrance. She parked her car and hurried to the

door. Two men were rolling a gurney toward the rear of the ambulance. Millie could tell there was a body on it, covered with a sheet. The men weren't in a hurry.

"What happened?" she asked, showing her I.D.

"Heart attack... male. Nurse Grisby said he was watching something in the movie room and just suddenly fell forward, out of his chair. He was dead before he hit the ground. Massive coronary."

"May I?" she asked.

"Okay, just be quick. It's not pretty, though," the man answered, looking around.

Millie remembered Harold's words and dreaded lifting the corner of the sheet. She knew who would be underneath, and she was right.

Don had bitten off half of his tongue during the heart attack. The blood had pooled in his open mouth, and his eyes were wide open as if he'd just seen a ghost! Millie quickly dropped the blanket and backed away from the gurney.

Many of the residents were in a sordid panic over Don's death, contending Harold's 'ghostly avenger' had killed him. Mr. Simpson called an emergency meeting for the administrative and nursing staff. He questioned them about the event and the rumors that were circulating. After being pummelled with an onslaught of testimony, he stood to make a statement.

"Okay, I've heard enough, people. Whispering Hills cannot continue to operate under the chaos Harold Miller and his delusions have caused. I have no choice but to immediately transfer him to a willing facility, or into state's care if no one will take him. I would appreciate your discretion on the matter. There are to be no discussions with our residents, including Mr. Miller, about my decision to transfer him. Please refrain from discussing the subject between yourselves, as well." He set his gaze on Millie before continuing. "I'm asking you to continue your duties in the professional manner I expect. Thank you. This meeting's over."

Many of the staff looked at Millie, expecting her to object. To their surprise, she remained silent and showed no emotion whatsoever.

The next day, despite Simpson's instructions, news that Harold's transfer had been scheduled for Friday made the rounds around the facility. The only person at Whispering Hills that didn't know about it was Harold.

Millie's heart was broken. After she recovered from the shock of Don's death, she decided to say goodbye to Harold. She wanted to prepare him for what was coming, regardless of Mr. Simpson's directive. She went to Harold's room after lunch. Harold heard the familiar knock on his door.

"C-Come in, Millie."

Millie entered to find Harold seated in a chair, by the window. He was staring outside. The curtains were lying on the floor by his chair. The sun was so bright that Millie was only able to make out his silhouette.

"Harold, why are you sitting there like that? You're going to blind yourself!"

"I don't c-c-care. Eddie doesn't like the light. That's why I took the curtains down. He told me he k-killed Don last night! He said he cut his tongue out and shut him up forever! I know they're gonna m-m-make me leave now... just like last time!"

"I won't lie to you, Harold. Don is dead. He had a heart attack. And yes, they *are* planning to transfer you. But it's going to be okay, I promise. You can get a new start there... so don't be scared."

"I'll m-miss you, Millie," he said, standing from his chair.

"I'll miss you, too, Harold."

Harold looked to his right and dropped his head.

"Eddie s-s-says you're glad I'm leaving, just like everyone else."

"I'm *not* happy you're leaving, Harold. Look at me. Does it *look* like I'm happy?" Her face was wet with tears now.

"No," he said. "You look sad."

Millie gave him a long hug and took his hand.

"Harold, I want to tell you something and I want you to listen to me. You're a good person and you haven't done *anything* wrong here." She paused before continuing, "It's Eddie, Harold. I believe you. He's real, but he's *not* what you think he is. I heard his voice on the recorder Dr. Langford used during your session. Eddie said some horrible things to him! He's evil, Harold! He's *not* your

friend. He's using you, and you have to get rid of him before you go to your new home! You *have* to make him go away... and I think I know how you can.

"Harold, I want you to call the Chaplain and ask him to come in here and get rid of Eddie. I could call him myself, but I'm sure I'd lose my job. It needs to be *you* making the call. Will you do that now, Harold? For me?"

"Can the p-p-preacher really make him go away? What if Eddie's too strong for him? He'll be mad!"

"Eddie's not stronger than God, Harold. Eddie's from the Devil! God is stronger than both of them... right?"

"I'm scared, Millie! Eddie said he'd never go, no matter what I did!"

"You can do this, Harold! You *have* to do this. Do you want to keep having to move from place to place? Do you want more people being hurt by Eddie?"

Harold sat down in his chair again, shaking his head no.

"I never wanted Eddie to hurt anyone, Millie. I know he killed my boy. He says he's protecting me from bad people, but you're right, Millie. He has to go away. I don't want anyone else getting hurt. I'll call the preacher man right now!"

Suddenly, the floor began to vibrate and a loud crash was heard just behind Millie's back! She spun around to see the large mirror from the wall coming to a rest on the floor. Broken glass was everywhere! When she turned back around, she saw Harold being lifted from his chair by an unseen force, then violently thrown to the ground! The bookcase in the corner began to shake, then slid across the room, almost hitting Harold! It stopped against the window, blocking out most of the sunlight.

Millie tried to help Harold get to his feet, but was suddenly thrown across the room! Her head struck the closet door on her way to the floor. When she opened her eyes again, she saw Harold trying to stand, only to be thrown down again!

Millie watched in horror as a dark mass began to form in the center of the room! The larger it grew, the darker it became! When it had fully formed, it rapidly crossed the room and hovered over her. It was darker than anything she'd ever seen before... impossible to see through! Millie began to feel immense pressure all over her body. She was being held firmly to the floor by the dark entity! She tried to scream, but no sound came out!

"No, Eddie! I told you not to hurt her!" Harold screamed from the floor.

People from the hallway had heard the commotion and pounded on his door. It remained shut tight, despite their efforts to get in.

Millie winced as she felt a cold hand squeezing her thigh. As it groped her leg, the pressure on her body made it difficult to breathe and impossible to move! She saw the outline of the mass begin to change its shape, taking the form of a large man! As she peered into the blackness, two eyes began to appear in front of her face! They were as black as the rest of it, with only a glimmer of reflection distinguishing them from the darkness around them.

“No! I won’t let you do it! You’re evil, Eddie! I won’t let you hurt my Millie!”

Millie could faintly see Harold’s form rising to his feet behind the entity. He stood holding a sharp piece of glass from the broken mirror. Millie immediately realized what he intended to do. She tried to scream for him to stop, but again, she was unable to make a sound!

“I’m sorry Millie! This is all my fault! I should have been stronger! Eddie is p-part of me and he has to d-d-die now!”

Harold lifted the shard of glass to his throat. The dark entity immediately abandoned Millie and spun around to stop him! But it was too late. Harold pulled the jagged piece of glass across his willing throat!

Blood instantly sprayed from the elder’s neck. As he dropped to the floor, the shadow creature let out a terrible scream! All at once, Millie’s lungs filled with air. She sat up, gasping for breath. As she scanned the room for Harold, the entity continued its deafening scream. It turned to attack Millie, but dissipated before reaching her.

Harold’s dying body lay twitching on the floor, the shard of glass lodged in his bloody palm. Millie tried to stop his bleeding, but Harold had left no question as to the outcome of his final act. His eyelids fluttered as death secured its final grip. Millie cradled his head in her arms as the door to his room burst open. Several people rushed inside, only to stop short of the horrid spectacle lying in the center of the blood-soaked floor.

Two weeks later, Millie returned to work, but only to say goodbye to her friends and coworkers. She decided she couldn't remain in that setting any longer. Whispering Hills would need to become a distant memory to her.

As she made her rounds, she visited the game room to say goodbye to her closest residents. She noticed the facility's atmosphere seemed lighter. After several tearful embraces, Millie visited the cafeteria for the final time. Gerald stood at the entrance, waiting for her. He shook her hand. Millie felt his hand trembling.

"It's alright, Gerald. I'll be fine, really. It's over now. You just take care of yourself, okay?" She hugged him and began to pull her hand away. Gerald held on tightly. She looked up at him and smiled, giving him a kiss on his cheek. Again, he refused to let go.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Millie. Eddie t-t-told me I had to say goodbye for *him*, too. But he s-s-said it won't be g-goodbye forever... that he'd see you real soon!"

Gerald let go of her hand and backed away, horrified by his own words. Millie stumbled backwards in fright as well.

Seconds later, the overhead lights began to flicker...

The End