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This is a short horror vignette/mood piece I have been working on.

### The Thing in the Tank

Jacob Bell needed the two mile walk from the campus to the hospital. The grey October chill seeped through his clothes and calmed him. Usually by the time he had made up his mind it was time to visit her again, his neck and ears burned and his head had begun to ache. The cool air was a welcome relief.

His feet brushed past orange and brown autumn leaves as he walked. Three years, he thought. Three years of crossing the campus to the hospital. Three years of dreading what he'd see each time he entered the room not knowing how much worse she would be. Today was no different.

The visits never went well. Each worse than the last. Her deterioration was steady. She was gone. Eaten away by the disease.

Jacob paused and watched a mildewing leaf tumble past and fold over itself. It landed in a water filled gutter, disappearing from sight. The sight sent a chill up his spine, and he shuddered. Steeling himself, Jacob Bell hunched his shoulders and continued towards the hospital and the thing in the tank.

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The hospital was state of the art. It served as both a research facility and a teaching center for the university medical school. Cold and unsmiling, it was a sterile dead thing. Faded prints of clowns with balloons and drab art by local artists did little to cover the white plastic walls which seemed forever encrusted with a layer of grime as if the diseases housed within deposited themselves there and stared out at passersby.

Marilyn was on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor. They all were. He took the stairs. He was only 44 and in relatively good shape, as good as anyone else in the Archaeology department, which he knew wasn't saying much. He liked the pain the stairs caused him. It cleared his mind and helped him to focus. He needed to focus.

I hate this place, he thought as he exited the stairs and smiled at the duty nurse. Her red-rimmed eyes and frayed expression gave lie to the rigid and unmoving smile she wore.

What is it like for her, he wondered. Twice a week is more than I can bear. She's here every day. Every day. With those things floating in darkened tanks, staring at you.

He forced the thought from his mind and walked briskly past a woman who had paused just outside of a room.. Her head was down, and she was weeping. For a moment, a brief instant, he thought of stopping and asking if he might be able to help. But, Jacob and Janet did not speak any more, did not look at each other and smile politely in passing. And, both were glad of it.

A year ago... Only a year? Jacob had stopped, and he had tried to comfort her. Janet's husband was in the room. He had been a computer technician of some kind. Maybe he was a programmer. Jacob wasn't sure. What he had been sure of was that he had found another person who understood, and for a moment, a brief instant, he did not feel alone. He was lonely. They both were.

They talked. Went for coffee. Then for dinner. Dinner led to drinks which led to bed.

The entire time he was with Janet, fucking, making love, lying naked next to her, inside of her, he felt Marilyn. She was there, watching, and she knew. He knew this as surely as if the tank were in the room with them.

And, when he slept, he felt Marilyn's skin wrap around him, slide over him and engulf him, a blanket of flesh still wet from the tank. Jacob woke screaming, the sheets soaked with perspiration. Janet sat naked in a corner of the room her arms clutched tightly about her knees. Her eyes were blank, unreadable. She didn't say anything as he dressed nor did she look up as he left the room. She had not looked at him since.

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Jacob Bell reached the room, and stopped. He braced himself against the stench. Placed his hand on the door. And, pushed. The door gave way, opening inward and releasing the smell that was his wife. A sweet, sickly smell like a compost heap on a summer day.

The tank sat in the center of the shrouded room, clear acrylic walls gave an unobstructed view of the thing floating in the dark.

The grey plastic walls of the intensive care room pressed about him as he slowly made his way towards the tank past displays and machines measuring and augmenting its - her - vital signs. A riot of tubes ran the length of the room and across the ceiling before they disappeared into the saline filled tank in which what was left of his wife floated.

Davol's Syndrome - named after a biologist at the University who first isolated the cause of the epidemic. Bell was glad his name was not associated with the disease, but he knew it was his fault.

He had led the expedition into the desert and found the nameless city. He had found the shuttered temple buried deep beneath the city. And, he had been the first to enter and see the ancient necropolis. The relic lay on a mound in the center of the temple surrounded by a thousand skeletal penitents.

It was a boy who had actually found the cave. Bell took the credit, built his career on it and lay awake at night knowing it was just dumb luck that brought him there. Luck and his need to make a name for himself. In order to secure his tenure he had unleashed this on the world.

The disease had stripped Marilyn's body of all connective tissue, dissolving her bones in the process. What was left more resembled a jelly-fish than a human being. But, she was a human being. She was alive, and she was aware.

He walked to the center of the room and sat in the lone chair which faced the tank.

"Hello Jacob," the synthesized voice said before he was half-way across the room. In the tank, his wife shifted positions, her flesh rolling over itself folding and looping as she moved, "It's been a while."

"Just two days Marilyn," Jacob Bell responded.

"Oh - it can be so hard to tell. Time passes. . . differently, now," the device monotoned.

"That's what the doctors tell me," he said. This was not true, but he understood the phenomenon. Marilyn lived her life in a sensory deprivation chamber. The saline was kept at a constant 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit by a battery of regulators and redundant systems built into the tank. The room was darkened to shield her eyes from unnecessary light. The combination resulted in what was essentially an isolation chamber, robbing

her of the ability to distinguish passages of time. Hence, the illusion of temporal distortion. He hoped.

"Have you thought about what I said the last time you were here."

"I don't know." How could he not have? He'd thought about it again and again and tried to block it from his mind. It was unthinkable.

"You don't know?" The computerized voice made it neither a question nor a statement. "It is what I want."

But, it's not what I want, he thought. Instead he said, "It's illegal."

"I won't be able to stand this for much longer. We can afford the necessary care."

"Yes, we can afford it, but you are not allowed out of the clinic. You know that."

The hiss of static seeping from the speaker served as the only sign of her exasperation. "You have no idea what it is like. There is so much pain. The light is blinding. Time doesn't exist here. And, the voices . . . . If there is a hell, this is it."

"Voices?"

"I can hear your thoughts and those of the people in the next rooms. The man next door is Martin Henry. He was a computer technician. . . before. He still believes they'll find a cure. Down the hall is a woman named Beatrice. She wonders why her family doesn't visit her anymore. Of course, I wonder why you bother. At night, we talk."

"I. . . . I don't know. . . ." God she's gone mad.

Inevitably in the 4th stages of Davol's - when the victim was more liquid than solid - madness became an issue. Delusions of psychic and precognitive abilities. Heightened response to stimuli. Hostility towards loved ones. And, finally, it was theorized, cerebral shutdown. But, not for years, and it hadn't happened, yet. It had only been five years since Davol's had been isolated. Somewhere in the city was a warehouse filled with tanks. No one was allowed to interact with 5<sup>th</sup> stage.

Marilyn was obviously showing signs of transitioning between the 3rd and 4th stages.

And, she wants to come home.

Inside, he sagged. He'd lied to her about the laws. Davol's had been labeled a purely genetic abnormality and was no longer considered contagious. He could afford the care, but he did not think he would survive it. His daughter would see what had become of her mother. He would have to face Marilyn everyday. No. It was better this way. But, not for Marilyn.

"You don't believe me? You think it's 4th stage, don't you? Maybe it is, but we talk." The electric hiss took over as she fell silent. "Take me home, Jacob. I know you are lying. I know you are afraid. I don't care about Martin's wife. Take me home to my daughter. I don't want to become this."

Become? Become what? "No," was all he could say.

"You did this. You fuck," she hissed. "You found that hole and opened it. You went inside and brought it out and now, I'm in here. You did this. That little boy, the one who found the hole and came to you, the one you paid to say you found the hole, he was the first. Where is his tank? Do you visit him?"

Bell sat and looked at the floor, saying nothing.

"I didn't think so." The thing in the tank swirled removing what was left of her face from view.

"Goodbye, Marilyn." Jacob Bell stood up and moved to leave.

"Jacob, I am coming home."

He paused and turned. Her eyes stared out at him from a mass of swirling hair and flesh. Jacob winced, noticeably.

"I won't let them take me to the other place, the warehouse. Yes, we know where it is and what happens there. I will come home to you before I let them take me."

Jacob stumbled from the room, remembering that night with Janet, feeling Marilyn's wet flesh form around him. Outside, he leaned against the door and slide to the floor.

Inside, the thing in the tank wept, saline mixing with saline - tissue floating over itself as she spasmed.

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That night as he slept she came to him, folding over his dreams with fluid skin and vacant eyes. The thing reached up

and out of his dream brought him down back down with her into the tank, and he knew. She would be coming home.

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Marilyn came home on a frigid day in February. The sky was slate grey, and the trees stood like pieces of twisted wire in the cold.