

Fiend

Samantha Vifquain

“Well ya heard what happened with Sarah’s kid,” Jannette purses her lips, “Caught tryn’ to sneak lip balm out of the store. God help her. It’s a shame too, she was so smart.”

One of the fathers grumbles, “All these kids are getting into trouble nowadays. Parents just don’t know how to raise ’em.”

“Oh they’re thirteen, it should be expected that they are going to break the rules,” I say.

The room murmurs with mixed reception, causing me to sink further back into the thin leather of the folding chair.

It’s Tuesday bible study at the local church. The fluorescent lights hum, painting the pale walls with an eggy yellow in one of the side offices outside the nave. In it is the usual ring of chairs; everyone always sits in the same spot, and no one new shows up to disrupt that.

The bible presses down onto my legs. Heavy. I keep my hands folded atop it, watching them shake alongside my bouncing heel. The room continues.

“Don’t even get me started with the Schmidts’ boy, you heard he got into a fight at school?” One of the moms’ voices raises above the rest. Attention snaps to her.

“It was the talk of the school board last night.”

“I heard his dad had to hide his hunting rifle.”

“My dear Abby was nearly struck because of him.”

“It’s that damn game his older brother got at the

mall,” Jannette says. She looks proud of herself.

Of course, everyone knows what she was talking about already. It’s the talk across the country. Some violent video game that all the boys are playing, but it’s just a dumb game, right? Surely the kids who have it and are acting out were already that way to begin with. Then again, it’s been getting tons of news coverage, so something must be happening.

Jannette continues, “I also heard that Carol was experiencing migraines from them playing it. Couldn’t sleep a wink because her boys would have it on late into the night.”

“The Schmidts’ boys are better than that.”

“Well I’m just saying. They were until that evil game. And it’s hurtin all the innocent folk with them.”

“You know, I bet Sarah’s kid also got her hands on it. They’re neighbors to the Schmidts.”

The tide of rumors only rose from there, sweeping my mind along with them. I keep quiet though. I need to hear what they thought was best. Lord. I am so lost. I can’t believe I didn’t realize how vile such things can be.

Pretty soon our session ends, and everyone goes their separate ways. My back is still plastered to the chair. I stare vacantly at my bible, lingering in the room before I realize I am the last to leave. I sheepishly grab my purse and turn off the lights.

The halls of the church watch me as I retreat out of the building.

The discussion echoes in my empty car as I drive home.

What should I do?

After an eternity of driving I reach my point of dread, pulling into the hole littered driveway and into the busted old garage.

I pause, pressing my forehead into the steering wheel. I let myself breathe for just a moment.

They're only rumors. Right?

I look to the door waiting for me to enter it and return home. A home that feels all too large despite being so small.

I let out a shaky breath, checking the mirror before exiting the car. I quietly open the mudroom door.

I hear Parker in the living room. The television is set at a respectful volume even though he was the only one home. Part of it still feels too loud, but that's okay. He's going to bed soon for school the next day.

I pass by the picture sitting atop the hallway desk. It's the only one of its kind that I leave up despite my wishes to have him out of sight and mind. Parker insisted. He misses him. I try not to.

I place my things onto the kitchen counter. I don't announce that I'm home, but I have a feeling Parker already knows the schedule. I grab one of his snacks from the cabinet before returning to the papers that also awaited my arrival home.

I'm not sure how long I sat there before giving up.

Despite the oncoming due dates I shuffle the forms aside for later. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Parker. Five more minutes and then let's start getting you ready for bed, yea?"

"Aw. How about ten?"

"Don't you have a quiz tomorrow? Five minutes."

"...Fine."

Seven minutes go by before I get up from the table and go to turn off the television. On it, I can see the scarlet mess of colors. The jarring movement

of the game he got for his birthday just this last week.

"Okay. You've played for long enough."

"I'm sorry. Let me save it really quick."

I wait and watch him effortlessly move the game to a different menu. I assume he saved it. I never know how kids could so easily figure out that kind of stuff.

"I'll turn off the tv. Go ahead and start brushing your teeth, okay?"

"Okay, mom!" He pops up, rushing past me. I hear his feet patter across the house towards the bathroom.

The aura of the room feels more sinister than before. The menu screen continues to blare out rock music that I didn't pay much mind to when I first got him the game. Now? It feels all too...savage. Pair that with the images that sit before me of some kind of man holding a gun to a devil, it makes my stomach churn.

I muster up my courage to walk over and turn off the television and his game console. The last thing to leave the screen is a single word, the title of the video game: *Fiend*. Its after image fades with dying static. I stand alone in the room thinking about what the church group would say. *How could I let this happen to him? To the rest of our community?*

I find an excuse to walk past the picture again before tucking Parker in for the night. After that, I sit in my own bed for what feels like hours. God. I don't want to deal with this alone.

I'll call up Jannette at some point. She knows my situation better than the rest.

—

"Throw it out immediately."

"It was a birthday gift. The last one he'd ever get from his father."

"Linda, it's all over the news. These video games are bad. Were you not listening at all during bible study last week? You know its evil is running rampant as we speak. Infecting the whole town for

all we know.”

I purse my lips.

“All I’m saying is that if it happened to Sarah’s girl, then it could happen to anyone. I’ve heard other neighbors saying that they’re starting to get headaches too just from even hearing about it through the news.”

“That’s ridicu—

“—I’ve been getting them myself, and I know for certain my Johnny isn’t playing that game. You’ve even said you’re having trouble sleeping. That’s one of the symptoms.”

“Trouble sleeping and a headache are normal.”

“...How’s Parker doing then?”

I pause. My eyes glance at the picture on the hallway desk.

“He’s fine... Schools been a little tough lately...”

“Has he had trouble focusing? Tired all the time? Getting in trouble at school?”

My breath catches. I find an excuse.

“He’s just bummed about a quiz. Math’s always been challenging for him.”

“...Linda, I want to help you, but you gotta be willing to do the hard things here. Think of what you’re doing to Parker by letting him continue this... evil. What you’re doing to yourself and others... What would Bobby have said?”

“...”

“Call me up if you need help with the decision. I can get the church group together for an emergency meeting.”

“...Mhmm, thanks Jannette.”

I hang up the phone with that message seared into my brain alongside the lingering headache. I can’t let anyone from the church know about this.

I’m not going to reach out for help anyways, what am I saying?

In the corner of the living room, the game’s box looks back at me. On the cover, the devil’s eyes seem to follow when I back away. My mouth dries, and the headache feels all the more present.

This is ridiculous, I repeat to myself. I stride over to the hallway desk and put the picture face down. Under my breath I hear an apology.

—

“Mrs. Zimmermann—”

“—Sorry, it’s just Ms.”

“Right.” There’s an air of annoyance as Dr. Jackson makes a display of clicking his pen and scribbling something on his clipboard. I shift in my seat to try and get a look. He moves the board away ever so slightly.

The sterile room of the doctor’s office makes me feel small, and I can’t help but notice how Dr. Jackson’s stool sits higher up than the worn chair I’m confined to. The air tastes sour.

“From everything you came in about today, there’s nothing actually wrong occurring. Headaches, trouble sleeping, they’re normal. Maybe you’ve been spending too much time on electronic devices before bed. Most patients who do that experience the same symptoms you claim to have.”

My heart twists a bit.

“If you just take some headache medicine and melatonin, I’m sure you’ll start feeling better in no time.”

I go to open my mouth. I want to retort. Tell him it’s more than just that. That there’s something seriously wrong going on, that I don’t know why it’s happening or what’s causing it. I don’t though, and listlessly thank him for the advice. What would I tell him anyways, that it’s a video game’s fault?

On the drive home I want to yell at myself for staying quiet. Though, I couldn’t have gotten out of that hospital faster. Before leaving, I glanced up to the all too familiar window. It still smells like death.

—

“Parker. Please turn off the game. You need to study for this test.”

“But I want to play some more.”

“Parker, math is important. Don’t you want to get a good grade?”

“...It doesn’t matter anyways. I’m just going to fail again.”

The game continues. My body tenses.

“Parker. Please. My head hurts from hearing the game all of the time.”

“I can turn down the volume then.”

“Parker!”

A silence hangs over the household. I scold myself for shouting at him. However, eventually, I hear the television turn off, and he walks over, slumping down at the table.

We don’t get far before he starts to fall asleep. I spend the rest of my night downing melatonin.

—

I feel all eyes on me as I sit in the church. The conversation isn’t about me, but it’s how everyone is sitting: guarded and judging. Jannette probably told them about Parker, either that, or it’s the way I’m slouched over, pressing my fingers into my head to try and fight off the throbbing pain. The back of my eyes feel hot.

“It’s not just migraines anymore. Full body aches, nausea, anger.”

“I heard Margaret had a seizure because of it.”

“It’s the politicians. They’re the ones letting technology poison our country. Think of the kids!”

“Half the school board is out sick right now, and several teachers are trying to find substitutes.”

The panic continues to snowball, burying me in its avalanche once again. I think of how confused and distraught Parker must be. Based on what everyone’s saying, he probably doesn’t even know what he’s going through. How could his young mind comprehend it? I want to cry. Not here though.

“What do we do then?” I finally manage to ask. Everyone turns as if they were waiting for me to show I was alive.

“Throw out the game,” One person jumped to answer.

One of the mom’s rolled her eyes, “It’s already too late for that though! The poison’s already

spreading.”

“We should take our kids out of school until it settles down.”

“And ruin their education?”

“Well at least I’m coming up with solutions.”

I fidget. My heart is pounding against my chest, aching. My joints are stiff. The headache has been present for what has to have been nearly a week now. I can’t function like this. I need an actual solution. I should go to the doctor again. I’m not smart enough to figure this out...

Unresolved, the meeting draws to a close. This time, I rush out first. I couldn’t be there any longer. Jannette tries to confront me as I leave, but I’m already clambering into my car. As I exit the parking lot, I hear her yell at me to get rid of the game.

Looking through my rear view mirror I can see the rest of the study group exit the church. I didn’t realize how sickly they all looked too... I gotta try something... Anything...

Eventually, I manage to arrive home.

The television is too loud once again. I send Parker to bed early. I sit in my own room and cry.

At some point between night and morning I find myself pacing back and forth downstairs. The game sits in the trash can. It stares back at me, and I want to throw up. I can feel a presence pressing onto the back of my head. I don’t know if they’re from the game, him, Parker, Jannette, God... it hurts.

“No.”

I take the game out and hide it somewhere. I only misplaced it while cleaning. That’s all. If Parker finds it, he finds it. However, until then, it’s out of sight, out of mind... I can’t just throw away a gift that means so much to him... I’m not ready to just throw away the last thing Bobby’s hands touched.

I down some more medicine before managing to pass out on the couch. My entire body aches. I’m running a fever. Why is this so hard?

—

“Dr. Jackson, please I can’t continue to live like this.” I hug myself sitting in the doctor’s office.

“Mrs. Zimmermann the best I can do is to advise you to continue taking the pain medication. I can get you some that will be more effective than the generic brand, but that’s all.”

“Please. Anything.” I push the words through the haze that’s clouded my mind. I’m broken. My body, every part of my body is throbbing. I’m a walking corpse.

“I’m sure a slightly stronger dosage could help you out, but in the meantime, I would also advise you to avoid stressful or distressing situations. They can make these sorts of things worse... Are you sure you’re staying away from electronics like I suggested?”

I manage to nod.

He scribbles what I assume to be nonsense.

“...Before you leave, you also mentioned Parker having trouble paying attention in school. I know it’s not why you’re in here, but if you’d like, we could screen him for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. An untreated child with ADHD can be a significant stressor in a mother’s life.”

“...Would that help him?” The words are barely above a hoarse whisper.

He nods. “If we can diagnose him with it, I can request the medication for him. Here, I’ll write down the name of a psychiatrist who can help out.”

I pause, piecing together what he said. “Are you saying there’s something wrong with him... like in the head?”

“Well it’s quite possible. It’s becoming more and more of a common case among the youth nowadays.”

Those words sit with me through the rest of the meeting and on my drive home. When I walk in, Parker appears to have found the game yet again since I’ve started hiding it. He’s quieter these days.

I look over at the hallway desk where his unzipped backpack sits. I see a crumpled up paper in it. A 67% in red marker is all that shows. Behind it

is the picture of three smiling figures. The doctor’s note in my purse grows heavy. The game, it’s poison to the mind... I shuffle over to the phone.

—

“Parker, it’ll help you do better in school. Don’t you want that?”

“I don’t like the pills though.”

“Not even if we sprinkle it over some yogurt?”

“It tastes bad, and it makes me feel all itchy and weird.” He squirmed uncomfortably. He looks thinner.

“Please? Just keep trying it for a little bit, and we can see how you feel? The doctor said it would take a week or two to start working. After that, you should start feeling better!”

“...Fine.”

After struggling through his breakfast, he zips up his backpack. For a brief moment I catch a glimpse of the video game in his bag. I almost stop him to tell him to take it out, but I remain quiet. He looks uncomfortable when I go to give him a hug goodbye.

—

“I don’t get it, Jannette. He should be doing better in school, but his teacher says he can’t sit still in class now... His grades are even getting worse, and he’s getting in trouble now too.” I push back the swelling tears. Lately, I’ve resorted to making these calls on the floor, cradling a bowl filled with bile in my lap. The nausea is getting worse.

“I’ve been having a similar issue here with Johnny.” Her exhausted voice replies. Even through the phone, it feels detached. “And nothing is helping. I’ve even tried giving him some of that strong medication I take when I’m feeling anxious. He’s been all sorts of loud and misbehaving. It’s making the headaches worse.”

I try to think through what Jannette was saying, but my brain draws a blank. “I just don’t understand what’s happening. Everyone around town is getting sick and the kids are all getting in trouble and

struggling in school... Where did we go wrong?"

"We didn't do anything wrong, Linda. You know what the real problem is, but you still haven't taken care of it. You know it's the game. Why is this so hard for you?" Her disdain pushes through the sickness.

My eyes roll over to the television. Its blank screen reflects a sad image. A mother, alone, slumped on the floor as she loses control of her life. *How could Parker be okay when I'm like this?*

I make eye contact with the photo. "I'm sorry. I don't know why it's so difficult, but I—"

"—There's no buts about it. Get. Rid. Of. It. You're poisoning him, exposing him and yourself to this satanic propaganda. It harms the mind and body. You're living through that right now."

"I... it's just that."

"Innocent people are getting sick because of it too. People that know better than to expose themselves to that hate are being poisoned. If you let Parker keep that game you're only letting more good folk suffer- like me. Linda, you're a good person too, but as long as you continue to let Parker ruin himself with that evil you're betraying God's will. You're abusing Parker."

I choke back the tears. They're streaming down my face. The picture on the desk continues to watch the scene before it. I've failed Parker. I've failed him. I've got to be the worst mother to have ever lived.

"I don't want this to continue. Jannette, please I need your help." I sob.

"...That's why I'm here. But you need to get rid of the game... If you can't, I'll have no choice but to get the church group involved."

"I will. I promise... All I want is for Parker to be okay."

I don't care how sick I feel. I can manage with Parker being temporarily mad at me. As long as he's okay in the long run. I can't lose him. I can't lose anyone else. I can't.

"I'll bring you some of my anxiety meds. They'll help calm you down."

—

A scream echoes in the empty home.

"Mom please! I'm sorry I'm doing bad in school! I'll do better! I swear!"

I try not to look at the garbage can. Guilt crawls up my throat.

Parker continues to beg. He's trembling. His face is red and wet with tears. I hate how used I am to crying at this point.

"Parker. Listen to me, please. This is for your own good. You can't focus in school, you're getting in trouble now, and I just want you to be okay can't you see that?" I'm not sure how Parker sees me right now. I'm mortified with myself though.

"Please! I'll do better I swear! I don't know why I feel bad, but don't throw out my game! It was my gift! It was from dad!"

I close the cabinet where the trash is. Out of sight, out of mind. Out of sight, out of mind.

I try to walk away, but Parker dives for the cabinet. I grab him.

He's screaming at this point. Flailing and hitting the air. A few strikes hit me.

"Parker, please," I yell, "Please."

He accidentally punches me across the face. I yelp and release him.

Why is this happening? Why is any of this happening? I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

I want to yell at him more, beg him to understand where I'm coming from, how I can't keep putting on a brave front and pretend like any of this is alright. His father, the video game, this sickness, this poison.

I'm so scared. I'm so lost.

I hear a shatter.

The house goes quiet. Lying facedown on the floor now, was the picture. The picture of the three of us, glass shattered all around it, and I see

my son standing at the end of the hall. A look of pained realization paints his face. It was obvious he had accidentally bumped the hallway desk while running out of the room, yet even still, he stands there. Scared.

I move to pick it up, and he backs away, turning and running upstairs.

“Parker!” I go to chase after him. Before I know it, I grab the two bottles from the medicine cabinet.

These will help. These will help him until the evil leaves this household.

Until the poison leaves his mind.

—

Stillness.

I continue to kneel there. Void of life. That single moment engulfs my mind. It plays again and again.

I finally hear the front door break open.

The ambulance sirens outside are no longer muffled. They spill in through the front door alongside the officers. I still haven’t hung up since calling them.

The flashes of red and blue paint my son’s bedroom through the window. His toys, bedding, books all lay strewn about. Violently thrown from their usual places during the struggle. Across the floor, scattered, are the different pills, exploded from their respective bottles. On those bottles, the labels with their warnings can be seen. They stare up at a mother who will weep endlessly.

I tried to make sense of them long after I should have.

The officers and paramedics finally reach the bedroom. I clutch the body of my son harder as they begin to move to take him away. His heart had given out minutes before they arrived. Its last pulse lingers on my hand. My tears splash against his still face. His eyes, wide, still meet mine. Stillness.

Those eyes leave me as we’re separated. I wish I had enough energy to yell, fight back, beg. I just go numb.

The scene plays in my mind again.

And again.

And again.

We’re being dragged out of the house now.

I see the paramedics rush him to the back of the ambulance. From the inside of the police car I hear them. They say the cause of death was a heart attack caused by a drug overdose of both the anxiety and ADHD medications. In their arms, the soft face of my son remains limp. One of the officers walks out with his backpack. Its zipper is broken, hastily ripped closed after the bag had been stuffed with items only a child would think to grab if they ran away.

Only one of them stares back, however.

A single word:

Fiend.

The devil’s eyes meet mine one last time.

The doors to the ambulance slam shut.