

—BLINK THE BLOOD AWAY

by R.M. Ridley

I see it out of the corner of my eye, a diagonal slice of red. It slashes corner to corner, across a still life painting that hangs on the wall. The red is bright against the dull browns and oranges of the picture's composition-arterial spray. I've never paid much attention to that picture before, but now I can't look away. Both of my hands are clenched around a coffee mug. How long have I been sitting here? It can't be long, the line of blood has fresh rivulets running down from it. Gravity exerting itself on the viscous liquid.

I know I should look around. Look, to see the truth of the matter. There aren't any screams, but I don't know what that means. Does it mean they're all dead? Did I kill everyone in the place? Or am I just having another one? Maybe no one's screaming because there's nothing to scream about. I can't believe it's real. I know it *has* to be another hallucination, but I'm too scared to find out it's not. What if I turn my head and find that I really did do it? Find that I killed them?

I realize I hear laughter. Surely, no one would be laughing if I had butchered people in here. Would they? No. It must be safe. Still, it takes effort. I have to force myself to move my eyes from that pointless still life.

Oh God! I did. I killed them all! Their bodies are slumped and hacked. The blood pools on the tabletops, around the coffee mugs and drips onto the tile floor. My stomach lurches while my pulse increases. I stare at the carnage with excitement and loathe myself for it. I see one woman, her chest is opened like a macabre cocoon. In my mind, flashes of stomping on her until the wet sounds were joined by sharp cracks. I feel joy, remembering reaching in and yanking the ribs apart. My stomach rolls and I feel the coffee coming back up my throat. I swallow instinctively, forcing the burning back down.

I take my hands from the mug. I still hear the laughter. Is it me? Am I laughing? No, I don't think it's me-it's a woman's voice. I jam the heels of my hands against my eyes. Push and rub. I want to grab my brain right through my skull and tear it out.

Now I hear other sounds; voices, the sounds of ceramic mugs on table tops, fabric shifting. I must face the room again. I'm terrified. What if the sounds are the hallucination, and the blood and the bodies are what's real? I can't give in. I have to check. I remove my hands but can't seem to will my eyes open. I'm shaking. I grip the edge of the table and bite my tongue. I try not to do it too hard, just enough to cause that acute pain but not enough to draw blood. I remember only too well what happened last time, when I bit too hard. The coppery taste-it was so hard to fight

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back with it flooding my mouth. I don't have *that* problem, I don't even *like* the taste, but still it was that much more difficult to overcome with the blood in my mouth.

But it works this time. The pain is enough of a jolt to get me to open my eyes. The place is as it should be. The people aren't hurt, they're talking and walking around. They're fine. It's *me* who's not. How long until it's not just visions? How long until I can't blink the blood away? I can't seek help for it. I couldn't speak to anyone about it. They'd lock me up. I couldn't stand that. To lose my freedom, my mind and my control-I'd rather be dead. I should be dead. I should stop being a coward. I might be saving others' lives by taking my own.

I push myself away from the table and stumble out the door. The fresh air helps, but I know it's not an answer. Not a cure. A cure would be a razor up the arm or a handful of pills, but I've tried that. I'm even more scared of what happens when I do. The black time. The one that comes between shoving the pills in my mouth and staring at them, dried, on the floor, where I must have spit them out. Spit them out with no memory. That blackness, how long is it? How long could it be the next time? No, the visions are bad enough. The quickening of the pulse that they bring terrifies me, but the black times...the unknown, that's the worst. If I weren't around, weren't conscious, would I act out those visions? No, I can't try killing myself again, of that I'm certain.

Being outside in the daylight helps because there are a multitude of things to distract me. The sheer number of people makes it hard to focus on them. I've had the hallucinations on the street, even during the day, and it can be a struggle, especially if someone stops to see if I'm all right. When that happens, I want to scream at them to run away-can't they see that I am far from all right! Instead I'll mumble my thanks and push on despite what my eyes see, what my mind shows me. Usually, if I keep my eyes rooted to a spot a few steps in front of my feet I can get about.

The day is ending, not a lot of people about now, and I hurry home.

I've managed to make it back to my apartment building without incident. As I enter the lobby, I see the elevator door closing. Please don't see me, please don't, I silently beg. But they do. An arm snakes out and activates the door into reopening. I tell them I'm taking the stairs. I see the looks they give me and I'm forced to look away. I'm saving them, and myself, pain, but they gaze at me like *I'm* inconsiderate.

I feel the red-the lust-rising. I *want* to enter. I want to take them up on their offer, their sacrifice. To ride that steel coffin could bring such pleasure. I clench my legs, my toes curling within the confines of my shoes, as though I could grip the floor and hold myself there against the demand. Within that space they'd have nowhere to turn, nowhere to run, and the screams would echo all along the empty shaft.

Then the door is safely closed. I wait, counting to ten before hitting the 'up' button. I pray that no one comes in before the next elevator comes. I can't do it. I can't allow myself. I'd wait all day down here before closing myself up in such a small, private space with people again. An elevator comes and I manage to get it to myself. Lucky. I wonder, though, for whom?

I sweat out the ride up, dreading that the door will open before reaching my floor. Finally, still alone, I'm able to exit. Quickly I head to the privacy of my apartment. A man passes me in the hall and I watch my hand flash out, driving his nose into his skull. The blood coats his face as I push past. I know that one was fake.