



Dozens of shirts lined the rack inside Mick's closet, but none of them went well with the pair of jeans he put on before them. One after the other, Mick ripped shirt off hangers, threw them over his head, and stared depressingly into the bedroom mirror. Every color. Every pattern. Each one looked worse than the last. He screamed inside his head, desperate to be satisfied and settle the stress making his body quiver.

It was just lunch with friends. No big deal. He knew that. Then why couldn't he stop second-guessing himself? Questioning every decision? Doubting his every thought? Mick tried to brush the nerves aside as random jitters, but the feeling grew until he was gripped by indecision.

He was alone in the bedroom, and the air was quiet. Only a lawnmower echoed in the distance accompanied by a bird cheerfully singing to the bright spring sunshine.

But Mick wasn't alone. He could feel someone watching him. Multiple someones, in fact, their eyes glued to him from every angle. Judging. Conspiring. Scheming. Whispering behind his back. They were in the ducts. Under the bed. Beneath the laundry. Everywhere.

"Honey, they're here," his wife yelled from the kitchen.

Her voice snapped his focus back to attention, and Mick let out a puff of air he hadn't realized he'd been holding in. After several deep breaths on the verge of becoming panicked gasps, Mick blindly reached back to the pile of shirts on the bed and grabbed one at random. He threw it on without looking and headed downstairs where Samantha waited to greet him with a smile.

"Nice shirt," she said before her lips lightly pecked him on his cheek.

She wore a cheerful yellow dress with a necklace of white stones dangling comfortably around her neck. Mick knew instantly she had no trouble picking an outfit. He had yet to even glance down to see what he had on.

Sam's heels glided her effortlessly to the door. She opened it to reveal Luis and Gwen exiting their car, a bland, puke-green sedan parked alongside the curb of their suburban development. Luis had on a Hawaiian shirt and wore it without regret. He probably chose it without the slightest bit of hesitation, and Mick simultaneously admired and pitied him for it. He then forced a smile as the two couples met on the porch, exchanging light kisses and handshakes before returning to the house.

The women retreated to the kitchen and returned a moment later, each holding a glass of white wine in one hand and a beer for their husbands in the other. Mick and Luis accepted their drinks and clanked bottles before taking a sip.

"So how's the propane business been?" Luis asked, initiating their own conversation separate from their wives' prattling chatter.

"Great," Mick said, bobbing his head. "Sales are up since last quarter and I'm due for a bump in commission on my next review."

"That's awesome. We've got a ton of badass new merchandise in the shop. You gotta see this stuff."

Luis went on unsolicited to brag about his electronics store like it was his first-born child. He spoke of televisions and video games the way an art aficionado might break down a Renaissance masterpiece.

Mick didn't say anything. He didn't feel the need to. In fact, he was quite certain he could've walked away and Luis would've gone on uninterrupted for hours. The man just kept talking and talking and talking until the sound of his voice became a high-pitched screech in Mick's ears. Every word from his wildly flapping lips sounded like nails on a chalkboard. Mick clenched his teeth, trying to fight the tingling shiver running up and down his spine.

"Excuse me," he finally interrupted when the stress became too much to bear.

Mick rushed to the bathroom and locked the door as quickly as his fingers could move. He ran the faucet to splash the cold water against his warm cheeks. It tingled and he rubbed his face hard, trying to wash away the anxious energy that clouded his thoughts.

"What's wrong with me?" Mick asked the pale facing staring back at him in the mirror.

He fixated on every feature. The wrinkles in his forehead. The lines running down his cheeks. The hollow anguish residing comfortably in his eyes. It was those eyes, lonely and desperate, that scared Mick the most, and he honed in on them, examining every inch until he realized they weren't his eyes at all.

There was something in the mirror, something watching him. Mick was sure of it. He just had to get it out.

He pried at the mirror's edges, ripping the frame right off the wall. He spun it around in his hands and clawed at the cardboard backing. The space was thin and small, but Mick reached inside and wiggled his fingers around. There was nothing. Just air.

Then he felt it.

Mick pulled out his hand. Between his fingers was a tiny ball about the size of a small marble. He'd never seen anything like it, let alone known it was there. Upon closer inspection, Mick discovered the orb had a lens on one side. That was when he realized the truth. He was looking at a camera.

Mick exited the bathroom and found everyone in the kitchen. Luis stood by the counter, tapping his foot as Gwen showed off her new earrings. Sam narrowed her eyes to focus on the top of Gwen's ear, part of which was gone.

"How did that happen again?"

Gwen let her hair down and flashed a sarcastic smile. "When I was nine, I went to pet a friendly dog that turned out not to be that friendly."

"Ouch," Sam said, simulating a pained grimace.

Mick looked at his friend. "Hey, Luis. You mind checking out something in the shed with me?"

"Absolutely," Luis replied, having already taken a step towards the back door.

The two men exited the house and walked across the manicured grass to a shed in the backyard. Mick entered first and decided against flipping on the light switch. Plenty of sunlight poured in through the windows and illuminated the space. On one side of the

shed was a workbench armed with hand and garden tools. On the side opposite the window was a rack filled with propane tanks Mick had brought home from work.

"Thanks, man," Luis said, closing the door behind him. "If I had to listen to those two talk about jewelry for another a minute I swear I was going to—"

"You sell a lot of security equipment in your store?"

Luis shrugged, barely interested in the question. "We don't really carry that kind of stuff. Some but not a lot."

"What about cameras?"

Luis nodded. "Oh, yeah. We have tons of those."

"Ever seen anything like this?"

Mick held up the marble-sized object, which made Luis squint with confusion.

"What the hell?" Luis muttered. He plucked the tiny ball from between Mick's fingers and rolled it around in his palm before gesturing to the workbench beside him.

"You mind?"

Mick held out his hands. "Be my guest."

Luis grabbed a thin screwdriver and swung around the bench's magnifier. A blinding fluorescent light bombarded the tiny camera, and Luis looked through the magnifier while working with the screwdriver. It took him nearly a minute to pop the ball in half. When he did, Luis's face grew long as he slowly inched closer to the glass between him and the mysterious technology on the table.

"This thing is crazy," he mumbled. Mick was unsure if he was speaking to him or just thinking out loud. "High definition, infrared, and a bunch of other stuff I don't even recognize. I've never seen anything like it."

Luis held the same baffled expression as he finally looked back to his friend.
“Where’d you even find this?”

Mick answered without emotion. “Inside my bathroom mirror.”

The crinkle in Luis’s brow smoothed as his eyes shot wide. “You kidding me?”

Mick shook his head. He didn’t know what else to say.

“Damn,” Luis grumbled out the side of his mouth. “You a spy or something?”

“Do I look like a spy to you?”

“I don’t know! What I do know is there’s not a store in the world you can walk into and buy a camera like this. It has to be government, or some super secret illuminati, or...” Luis gasped, dramatically. “Are you an alien?”

A sound resembling an annoyed chuckle reverberated out of Mick’s throat. “Give me that thing.”

Mick reached for the worktable, but Luis quickly grabbed his arm. “Wait. Hold up. There’s some kind of serial number in here.”

“Let me see,” Mick said, gently nudging Luis out of the way.

He pressed his face up to the glass where the minuscule device became the size of a grapefruit. The ball’s insides resembled a tangled mess of electronics, wires and circuits crisscrossing every which way. Mick had no idea what he was looking at, but buried within the camera’s guts he could make out a series of numbers and letters. They read: TRU3-M4N.

Mick had no idea what it meant.

“So what should I do with it?” he asked with his face still stuck to the glass.

Before Luis had a chance to respond, the creak of the shed door drew the men's attention. Mick looked up from the workbench expecting to see his wife. Instead, he was surprised to find the large, foreboding figure of his neighbor in a greasy set of overalls.

"Hey, Buck," Mick greeted, suspiciously. "What are you doing here?"

Mick didn't know his neighbor well. In fact, the man kind of gave him the creeps, and Mick's wariness kicked into overdrive when Buck started approaching them without saying a word.

"He asked you a question, big guy," Luis seethed, his voice clear with threatening annoyance.

Buck came closer until he could go no further without touching them.

"I'm sorry for this," he said, softly.

Mick wondered what he was talking about but stopped when he noticed Buck hiding his hand. "What's that you got behind your—"

Buck burst into a violent fury, smacking Mick in the head with a large wrench. A sheet of darkness filled Mick's senses, accompanied by a loud ringing that vibrated inside his skull. For a brief moment he forgot who and where he was, but the world came back to him slowly as the sounds of a brutal scuffle echoed far off in the distance.

It was difficult for Mick to gauge how long he lay helpless on the shed floor, his throbbing head buzzing from the inside out. The grunts and groans of the fight came to him like an echo, and Mick suspected a concussion was to blame. When he finally summoned the strength to open his eyes, the world was a blur. He could only make out vague shapes in a hazy light, but it was enough to realize his neighbor had beaten his friend to a pulp and now stood over him holding a wrench dripping with blood.

"Buck..." Mick cried. "What the—What the hell are you doing?"

"You can feel their eyeballs, can't you, Mick? Their eyeballs are everywhere."

The giant brute's voice seemed to emanate not from a mouth but from the darkness shrouding his face.

"Eyeballs?" Mick repeated, his voice trembling. "What's wrong with you, man?"

Buck gestured as if squeezing something tiny between his fingers. "Puny little eyeballs watching us every night and day."

The words resonated with Mick. He felt them deep inside his soul, probably because he'd thought them himself only minutes earlier.

"You mean...the cameras?" Mick asked in a moment of hopeful revelation.

"You're talking about the cameras, aren't you?"

"There's nowhere for us to go," Buck bemoaned while letting the blood-soaked wrench slip from his hand. "They'll find us everywhere."

Mick sat up while the world came into focus. "Buck, just calm down. I don't know what's gotten into you but—"

"I'm not crazy!" Buck shouted, spit dripping from his lips.

Mick shook his head. "I never said that word."

"You were thinking it," Buck accused with a firm finger pointed down at Mick. "It was about to ooze out of your lips. I know it!"

"Just tell me about the cameras," Mick pleaded. "Did you find them, too?"

"They're watching," Buck rambled, his mind fragmented in a million pieces. "All the time. Our every move. Just for their entertainment."

"Who Buck?" Mick urged him to answer. "Who's watching?"

"We need to stop them. We need to hide. And the only way..." Buck turned slowly, allowing his gaze to fall upon Luis still lying helpless on the floor. "...is to have eyeballs of our own."

Mick felt frozen and could only watch as Buck bent down over his friend and placed his massive hands on Luis's face. A shriek of pain erupted through the shed, and Luis flailed, desperately trying to get free from the monster of a man pinning him down.

The screams continued even as Buck stood. He lifted his hand to the light peering in through the window, proud of the trophy delicately grasped between his fingers. It was a small round ball with strands dangling beneath it. Mick didn't want to believe what he was looking at, but he couldn't deny it when Buck twisted his hand, allowing Luis's eyeball to glimmer in the light.

Luis continued to shriek in terror, but now Buck's ghoulish giggles accompanied him. The sound of the maniac's laughter caused a rush of adrenaline to surge through Mick. Ignoring the spike still pounding in his head, he jumped to his feet and sprinted at Buck, catching the massive man off guard. The two of them crashed into the rack at the back of the shed, causing an avalanche of propane tanks to spill over the floor.

Buck's laughter was gone, but a faint hissing noise had replaced it. Mick and Buck sat up in the pile of tanks, each one knowing exactly where the noise was coming from. Mick felt panic and knew by the ominous smile on Buck's face that the maniac didn't share his sense of dread. Still lying on the ground, Buck reached down and removed a matchbook from his overall's pocket. His giggles returned.

"Luis, wake up!" Mick cried, rolling over onto his friend. "We have to go!"

A thick mask of blood covered the side of Luis's face. He wasn't screaming anymore, just sobbing while his hand hovered over the hole where his eye had once been.

It was a ghastly sight, but Mick pushed the thought aside while pulling his friend off the floor. "We have to get out of here now!"

Once on their feet, Mick wrapped Luis's hand around his shoulder and began a slow limp towards the shed door. Mick didn't turn around but could hear a match repeatedly scraping against the book. Along with Buck's giggles and the hiss of propane filling the room, the sounds came together like a scratchy song of imminent death.

Luis and Mick pushed through the door and into the backyard, continuing to limp as fast as they could. They only managed a few more steps before the shed exploded, erupting into a ball of flames that shot into the sky and sent the two men flying across the lawn.