“Smiling Man”

The janitor hummed "Daisy Bell" as he thought of his sick daughter, to whom he sang it through her devastating case of tuberculosis. It was after hours, and he was ready to lock up, when a thundering downpour began. He put his back to the wall and sank down to the floor, deciding to wait until the storm passed. He was really hoping to arrive home before eight to get home to his young girl. Another fifteen minutes went by and the rain remained relentless. He took up his broom and resumed his sweeping. Hoping to pass the time, he collected the trash from the cafeteria. He was humming again when footsteps echoed behind him. He spun around, finding his face was now inches away from that of a pale man. His skin was almost lactescent, his eyes black and solid. He remained unsmiling and motionless. Beads of sweat formed on the janitor's forehead as he stumbled backward.

“Wha-who ar-are y-you? What i-is this?”

He raised the handle of his splintering wooden broom, acting as a fragile barrier. He squeezed his eyes shut and braced himself— only to open them and find the hallway completely empty.

"Just a silly prank," muttered the janitor, "a silly prank..."

The fluorescent lights above him flickered eerily. He entered a tiled bathroom, kneeling down and shuffling through cabinets to find a specific cleaning product. When he stood and looked into the mirror in front of him, his blood ran cold. The man was standing behind him. He broke into an unyielding sweat of panic when the lights suddenly shut off.

Desperate to leave, the janitor ran for the door. He felt for the handle and twisted it frantically, digging his nails into the mechanism and cutting his hand on the sharp lock parts, only to find it was locked from the outside.

“No! No, no, no!”

The lights flickered back on, and the janitor felt a light, steady breathing from behind him. He turned slowly, face to face with the pale man again. Only this time, his lips were curled into an ominous smile.

The lights flickered off once more, and the janitor froze in place. Then he heard it - someone quietly humming "Daisy Bell". It was quiet and soft, like a distorted version of his daughter’s sweet voice. Then he heard footsteps running around and around, echoing in the small bathroom. The lights buzzed to

life again, revealing the pale man once more. His slight smile had grown and peeled back into an unnatural grin stretching from ear to ear.

The lights snapped off, and the janitor shot up to begin twisting the doorknob. The door flew open, and he scampered out into the hall. The lights turned on, showing the truth... This was not the hall, but a replica of the bathroom behind him.

“No! How could this be? Please- my daughter is home alone! Let. Me. Out!”

He turned and looked through the open door, shivering at the sight of the smiling man behind him. The lights blinked on and off. On and off. The pale man stepped closer, the grin on his face unmoving. The janitor scurried across the replica room, opening the next door. The same bathroom. He lunged and burst through the fourth door, his sliced and bloody hand causing him to slip and struggle to his feet. This room held yellowed tiles, dirty mirrors and sopping-wet floor that now pooled around him, soaking his clothes. He slammed his entire body into the final door, bursting into the same nightmare. He was stuck in an unrelenting loop. The pulsating lights above him buzzed loudly like a dying insect. His lungs burned as he sucked in the dank air. Panting heavily, his legs trembling as he whipped around, watching, with dread, as the entity inched closer. Figures like his daughter appeared around him. She looked thin and sickly, but the blood she coughed up quietly and helplessly remained the same. The lights flashed quicker until they flickered off completely. He was swallowed by the harrowing darkness. Tortured by the sounds of the creature inching closer, the final image of his daughter’s hemoptysis, and the humming of sweet “Daisy Bell”, he began to weep quietly. The final note of the song played as the room twisted inward and shifted around him, before it abruptly cut off and plunged the room into silence.