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The Video Tape

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Nicholas found something extraordinary and impossible in his attic the other day. It was a video tape.

It was early November, and November meant cold weather, and cold weather meant the heavy clothes needed to be dragged out of the attic. So Nicholas was bent over in this chilly, dark space, shoving around boxes full of forgotten treasures so he could reach some other boxes full of funny-smelling sweaters. In the furor of moving all these boxes he happened to knock one over, an ordinary-looking container full of old video tapes.

Nicholas groaned, and leaned over to gather up all the VHSes, but the title of one, neatly printed on a fresh white label, made him stop. It was called Tomorrow. It struck Nicholas as a very unusual name for a video tape. The other ones had innocuous names: Disney World trip 98, Alicia's B-Day, As the World Turns, all of them with cracked, yellowing labels. They threw up dust when Nicholas touched them. The one called Tomorrow was pristine.

Gripped by curiosity, Nicholas descended the stairs, went into his living room, and found his old VCR under the entertainment center. He barely remembered how to connect the old A/V cables to his new TV, but he was possessed by
some unknown force to complete this task. He finally turned the VCR on and popped the tape in.

The tape played immediately – no rewinding was required. The image that appeared on screen was impossibly clear for a VHS: it filled the screen in 1080p and flawless HD quality, with no motion blur, no washed-out colors. Nicholas might as well have been watching that day's ESPN broadcasts.

It was a video of an empty hallway. Whoever filmed this had done it with a handheld video camera. It didn't take Nicholas long to realize this was his house. There was the upstairs hallway; the way it curved and opened up was unmistakable. Light speckled the hallway in exactly the same way it always did in the afternoon, odd and crystalline yet beautiful. But the hallway on the video was a different color. It was an ugly yellow. Someone had painted it. The new color clashed with the reflected light horribly, making it look like an ugly stain. A drab, gray expressionist painting hung on the wall that didn't fit at all with the color of the hall. A sense of revulsion curdled to life in Nicholas's stomach.

Unconsciously, without even deciding to, Nicholas rose and walked into his garage. He opened his toolbox and got out a hammer. When he came back to the living room, the video still showed the ugly hallway and the ugly painting. He studied it carefully.

Slowly, Nicholas made his way upstairs, located the precise spot where the horrible artwork had disgraced his living quarters, and smashed it with a hammer.

It felt good. He swung again, and now the hole was wider, again, now it was a gaping maw, again, downward, until a large crevasse stared at him where his wall used to be. He stared into the crevasse. Nicholas then decided that he was satisfied.

Nicholas walked back downstairs and sat down to watch the mysterious video tape again. To his pleasant
surprise, he saw that the giant hole he had made in the wall was now on the video, and the drab gray painting was gone. Nicholas allowed himself a small sigh of relief.

This turned into a horrified gasp when he saw the video turn around, head downstairs, and go outside to view the shoddy yard work that had been done to the front of his house.

“Nick, is that you making that awful smell?” Nicholas turned around. It was his neighbor Tommy. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I need to do this quickly.” “What is that?” Tommy pointed to the bottle whose contents Nicholas was spreading around his yard. “Vinegar,” said Nicholas. “Vin – why?” “I need to kill the grass.” Tommy crossed his arms. “Are you going to re-sod the yard?” “I don’t know.” “Well... what about the people who are coming to look at your house?” Nicholas looked down and started fumbling in his pockets. “It might be bad someday. It’s worse on the video tape, trust me.” “What?” Nicholas continued to fumble in his pockets. “It’s worse on the video tape.” “What are you talking about, what video tape?” Nicholas pulled out a box of matches and pulled one out. “Should I burn it, too? Just to be safe?” Tommy began to back away.

Some time later, the house was properly in shambles; the lawn was brown and dying, and would probably soon be
set aflame. The rafters were torn down, the shutters had had holes blown in them from a blowtorch, and the vinyl siding had been shot at. Nicholas observed all this and decided to go back inside, careful not to trip over the front door that was lying in the driveway.

As he entered the house he was assaulted with mosquitoes and flies that had come in through the open and broken doorway and windows. More concerning to him, however, was the living room, where he had torn the carpet up. He had to tiptoe very carefully in order to avoid stepping on an exposed nail. The only thing that was pristine in the room was the entertainment center, where rested the television and the VCR which continued to show the video that he had watched and observed so obsessively over the last three days.

Nicholas found a nail-less patch of wooden floor to sit on and lowered himself down. If the video finally showed what he wanted, then he could finally feel free to take a baseball bat to the television. Nicholas sat and watched the video, and a huge wave of relief washed over him. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen: yesterday.

He whistled as he picked up the baseball bat and finished his work.