



# THE LEARNING ROOM

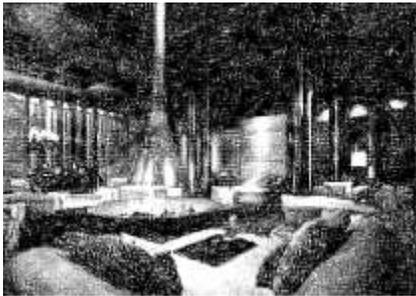
A Tale of Science Fiction - Horror

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**T**hat's when she stabbed him. He had finished berating her and had turned around, his back facing her. In the dim light, he hadn't noticed the knife. The blade felt warm in her hands. Alice slipped the steel in right under his right shoulder blade. He screamed just before she pulled the knife out. She could taste his fear. Blood spurted across the room. The air smelled of copper and rose petals. He slumped to his knees and ended up falling down face first.

There was a bright flash. Alice found herself laying on the cold, white bench which pretended to be a bed. In fact, everything in the room was white: nightstand, lamp, floor, walls, the works. It was important to the treatment. Although she didn't know why. There was little time for any distractions while the machine was resetting. In another five minutes, they'd begin again. The time always seemed to pass quickly.



The room was split-level. The upper part hosted the dining room table and the china cabinets. Paintings adorned the walls. On the south side was a massive picture window. On the far side was a bookshelf, filled with perhaps a hundred leather-bound volumes. In the lower half sat the stone fireplace. Above it was a large brass funnel-shaped flue to catch the smoke and the rising heat. Around it sat Swedish-style cushioned chairs and a three-person, L-shaped couch. It was all a modern style, save for the paintings. all were painted by the same brush strokes you might see in any museum. But these were displayed in no gallery, only visitors to the living room would see these works, minor though they might be. By the picture window were two china vases, each one containing a rose bush. Not the red ones you might think of, but black. Only their edges were tinged with red, the rare red-edged rose pedals.

His voice was calm and quiet as he spoke to her. But in her mind, he was berating her. Even with the dim light, Alice could see everything. Every detail in his crisp face. The blooming roses on the nearby table let out a smell that couldn't be ignored. He finished speaking and he turned to face the door on the far side of the room. He wasn't leaving, Alice thought. He couldn't leave. She plunged the knife into his back. Blood exploded from the entry point, flying everywhere. He had just enough time for him to turn, his eyes to meet her's as he crumpled to the floor. The room was silent. Alice stayed there, immobile as if possessed by a trance. The blood spread across the room as if it were a lake swelled by the rains. She only realized the passage of time then the flashing red and blue light poured in through the picture window. Alice was still holding the knife in her hand. Its edges dripping in red, like the roses.

The white room didn't have a smell, save for the antiseptic used to wash the surfaces. It was a dull smell, no more colorful than the walls. Each time Alice returned here she had the chance to reflect. What did they want from her? Alice wanted him dead. He had to die. Why didn't they understand this? What was the point of them making her stab him repeatedly? He deserved to die, but only once.

The fire sputtered in the fire pit, sending its dim, flickering light across the room. This time Alice noticed the air was heavy. It was going to rain. She remembered the rain. Large drops crashing on her head as the police took her, handcuffed, out to the cars with the flashing lights. She glanced down at the knife in her hand. The blade was carbon steel, which meant it held an edge longer. The handle was a deep black polymer with a custom-grip surface to prevent slippage. It was so finely balanced, she could hardly feel it in her hands. He entered the room as he always did, returning a volume to the shelf before he turned

to face her. The argument began as it always did. Her voiced accused him with more venom than an angry cat. Yet he never saw the knife. No matter how many times he'd approached her, he never saw the knife. The dim light reflecting off the steel blade.

This time Alice stabbed him in the heart before he even got a chance to finish his first sentence. It was getting easier. She twisted the steel as she withdrew it, so his blood virtually exploded across the room. It was like standing in a shower of blood. Alice could see the surprised expression on his face. The light slowly drained from his eyes. He teetered slowly and then fell backward.

Alice held onto the blade. She didn't want to drop it. The carpet was already a mess. It was going to be the devil to clean. Once again, it all seemed like a dream; an ugly, ugly dream. How could he do this to her? The thought danced around in her head unanswered. Until the flashing red and blue lights roused her from her lethargy. She walked to the front door, to open it for the police.

The white room appeared again. There would be a few minutes delay for the machine to reset. Time couldn't be manipulated without the expenditure of vast amounts of energy. The far wall lit up as a screen. The face of a tall brunette appeared on the screen. "Ah, there you are." She said in a stone-cold tone. "I wanted to thank you. You did such an excellent job." The woman's eyes flashed with deception and not a small amount of glee.

"You were far cheaper than hiring an assassin. Not to mention you have no possible link to our government. And all I had to do was tell you a simple lie about your husband and his secretary." She paused for effect. "I wanted you to know it was a lie. He never touched her. Even though we wanted him to get very involved with her. The scandal would have been delicious. I was frankly surprised. The girl is one of our best agents. Highly skilled at seduction. She'd never failed before. But I'm sure she'll get over it. I hope you enjoy your sentence."

The screen when blank, only the white walls remained. Alice stared at it. She knew no one else would ever see the message. It was meant for her and her alone.

The white room faded. The fire popped and sputtered in the room's center. The smell of the roses drifted across the room in the heavy air. He entered the room as he always did, returning a leather-clad volume to the shelf before he turned to face her. "I was thinking of having dessert on the porch, but I think it might rain.

Alice smiled. "I sure it will, I can almost feel it."

"I'll have chef bring it out and put it on the dining room table. He's made a magnificent Brioche suisse à la crème pâtissière et aux pépites de chocolat. I think you will like it." He approached her and saw the gleam of the knife in her hand.

His eyes went wide. "What's with the knife?" he asked pointedly.

Alice gave him a wry grin. "I'm going to need something to cut the Brioche, don't you think?"

"Yes," he agreed, "I believe so."

The two proceeded to the dining room table. He pulled out a chair and waited for her to be seated. He pushed the chair gently when she was ready. “Do you think your device will have any useful value?” she asked.

Alice adjusted herself. “I mean, it can only send one person back in time for a few minutes.”

He sat down across from her. “Not much utility there,” she explained.

“I have a few plans for it.” He told her. “It might have some value after all.”