

## BLEAKER STREET

The old brownstone sits mid-block, one among many once-beautiful neighborhood apartment houses. Built-in an era when carpenters were artists and milkmen were friends. It housed the residents of a bustling city. Life spilled from her thick oak doors; it burst from her long graceful windows, curtains dancing in the breeze. The sounds of children playing on the sidewalk mingled with those of the busy street. Now, the faint light of a fading afternoon shrouds her five stories in a gray dim. Intricately carved framework around her long, narrow windows, exposed for too long, is breaking away. The edges of her massive stone blocks are crumbling. There is no skipping or shouts, no rattling milk bottles. It is the dead of winter on Bleaker Street. A brutal storm is closing in.

On a bench at the bottom of an elaborate marble staircase, two older women sit side-by-side on a worn upholstered bench inside massive double front doors. The Widow and Victoria, the landlord's frumpish wife, sit gossiping. For some thirty years, The Widow has woven their conversations through the comings of goings of fellow tenants. She wears an expensive wool dress with a pressed lace collar; she is exceptionally spiteful today. Victoria sits attentively, knees pressed together like a schoolgirl nodding her head in agreement.

“Where do you think she’s gone?” The Widow doesn't wait for an answer; she

gets up abruptly and peers out the thick glass of the front doors to the sidewalk. A strong wind is driving sideways the first icy pellets of the storm.

"Imagine taking a baby out in weather like this," The Widow says with disgust.

"That poor child," Victoria shakes her head, "It shouldn't surprise us, her doing something like this," her words are sing-song, swelling and diminishing for effect, a smug homily. The Widow turns her attention from the street to Victoria.

"What's that apartment like," she says, voice snippy. Then, "do you, people, even know?" Victoria stiffens, immediately afraid of the shift in their conversation. Recently, the Widow's gossiping inevitably pivots from the caliber of females visiting the bachelor in the garden apartment or the shopping habits of the young couple in 4D to the young woman and her baby living in a studio apartment across from her. Victoria shifts uncomfortably on the bench.

"There is nothing we can do about it," Victoria says, voice weak with counterfeit authority. "She...well, I mean she doesn't cause any trouble, and Henry says..."

"*Henry says,*" the Widow mocks, "for God sakes, Victoria," the Widow points to the street, "What about that?" Then, anger building, "Of course you *can* do something!" Victoria settles deep into the old bench, the pastel chrysanthemums of her housecoat blending her into the worn floral upholstery.

"I hate storms," the Widow says under her breath.

"You know how he is," Victoria mumbles, "he feels sorry for her." The Widow spins around, hand on her hip.

"Sympathy has nothing to do with this," the Widow raves, "She has no business with a child. I can't even imagine what's going on in that apartment."

“Late the other night,” Victoria whispers, “I’m sure I heard her door close, then someone coming down the stairs,” she says excitedly, “it was a man! heavy steps and all.” The Widow sit. Their gray heads bend inward; a cocoon surrounds them, closing them off from the rest of the world creating their own where judgments are confirmed opinions validated.

"She doesn't care about that child; she's a..." The Widow is cut short by the sound of the basement door creaking open under the stairs. The women straighten up. Henry is big and fit; despite his age. His imposing frame fills the hallway. A large ring of keys hangs from his belt and clinks softly as he walks.

"Afternoon," he says. He does not look at them, familiar with the web surrounding them. They sit unmoving until he has rounded the second-floor landing before the Widow resumes.

“A woman like that should not be allowed to have a child....”

“Victoria!” The landlord's deep voice echoes in the stairwell. Victoria’s slipped feet are on the stairs in a second.

“I’m coming!” halfway up, Victoria turns, “We’ll talk later,” she says, "ok?". The Widow is annoyed by the abrupt end to their conversation and how Victoria hurried away.

“Just go,” the Widow says, waving her off.

The storm has darkened the foyer. An exposed bulb above the door snaps on just as the Widow makes a final inspection of the street. It startles her and makes a gloomy mirror of the glass. The Widow finds herself staring at her reflection. The wrinkles around her mouth appear as deep grooves; her petite nose is skeletal, eyes are hollow pools. She draws her fingers across her cheek, smoothing the lines that have given her a

ghoulish mask. Again, she tries to erase the image that unnerved her, like the storm. Finally, she lifts her chin, steps closer, and lets the light wash over her face, erasing the monster. The Widow smooths wayward strands of hair into the knot at the back of her head, she tidies her collar, and turns for the stairs.

Wind batters the city, blasting the snow that clings to the roofs and ledges. It drives through the streets and swirls in tiny white tornadoes along the curbs, in the doorways. A young woman trudges down the sidewalk, pitched forward into the strong wind. Her shoulders are curved around a haphazard bundle of colored blankets, edges flapping wildly in the wind. Her coat slaps at her reddened knees as she climbs the stairs to the brownstone.

Opening the heavy door against the wind takes all of her strength. Once inside, she stops at the bottom of the staircase to catch her breath and let the sting in her hands and face subside. She eyes the long staircase, like a mountain in front of her. Her footsteps resound in the stairwell; they bounce off of the five floors above her, then blast at the pain in the back of her head. Finally reaching the landing, she has to steady herself against the railing.

"Almost home, Bethy," she whispers breathlessly. Then, as she struggles the key out of her pocket, she hears the door across from hers click open.

"Oh no," she whispers. Accustomed to the Widow's harsh stare, she hurries past, fumbling with her key. It was exhaustion that made her turn around, a desperate flutter of hope rising out of weakness, out of the unrelenting pain in her head. Maybe the Widow would offer a kindness, perhaps even say "hello."

The Widow walks out onto the landing.

"You take that child out in this weather?" she demands, voice trembling with anger. The Widow had never made eye contact with the young woman before. Today she gawks, inspecting her clothes and shoes, the messy bundle of blankets. When she looks at her face, the Widow is taken back. The mother is ghostly pale. Her black hair is separated into long strands, melting snow drips onto the marble floor from the tapering ends. It is plastered against her anemic-looking skin. Her dark eyes are rimmed red. A dull army-green wool coat, two sizes too large, hangs from her narrow shoulders. The Widow is sure. The young woman is a derelict.

"I, I needed something," the mother mumbles, finally opening the lock.

"What is wrong with you?" the Widow shouts, anger boiled into a shrill reprimand. The mother hurries inside.

"I should call the authorities!" The words trail in as she closes the door, turns the lock, and presses her forehead against the door.

"Oh, Bethy."

Carefully, as if quick movements would crush her, she walks to the kitchen sink in a dingy row of cabinets along one wall. She swallows down the pills the druggist told her would work on the pain. She crosses the single-room apartment to a twin bed pushed against the wall and lays the baby down. When she pulls her coat from her shoulders, it slips to the floor. Considering how it would hurt to bend down, she leaves it there. Unnaturally thin, her elbows and hips poke at her clothing.

A small cry emanates from the blankets. The mother slowly peels back the layers of blankets as if she is unwrapping a present. When the light hits the baby's face, the little girl squints, focuses on her mother, and smiles. A faint pink cast tints her milky cheeks.

Dark brown eyes edged in thick lashes.

“How did you get so beautiful?” The mother rocks backward slightly as she lifts the baby from the bed. The only furniture, a single tattered chair, is angled next to a row of long, narrow windows. They are naked save for ancient yellowed shades rolled to half-mast. A wave of nausea takes her as she sits. A silent inundation of snow has replaced the constant blow. The kind of snow that clumps together as it falls, blanketing the earth in minutes. She unbuttons her shirt, puts the baby to her breast, and gently coaxes her to nurse. Unable to keep anything down for days, she fears her milk might be scarce. Frustrated, she lays her head back and gazes out the window.

A streetlamp below throws a circle of light onto the sidewalk. Feathery snowflakes roam and float in the ring of light, tiny luminous fireflies. A couple suddenly appears. They stop under the streetlamp and embrace. The lamp highlights the side of the man's face. He is handsome. The woman is tall; she wears a red coat that hugs her body to mid-calf. She carries herself the way some women do, with a straight back, and her chin up. Her face is hidden, yet the mother envisions the woman as a great beauty because the man kisses her with such kindness. He brushes snow from her hair and whispers something in her ear. Then, they move out of the circle of light.

Snow falls in beautiful, cascading torrents.

The baby falls asleep. Puffy mounds of white pile up to a cone on top of the streetlamp. She wishes she were beautiful like the woman in the light. She pulls her shoulders back and straightens her slumped shoulders. All of it makes her head hurt worse. She wishes she had never seen them. She wonders why it hurts so much, her head, the weight in her chest after seeing the couple. She looks at Bethy and pleads.

“Give her a straight back.”

The pain suddenly eases; she lays her head back. A soothing warmth spreads across the back of her head. Taking a deep breath, she smiles slightly. Her eyes, heavy with relief and sudden, overwhelming tiredness, close. Her head slowly slumps to the side.

A crimson bead appears at her left nostril, draws a thin red line down the side of her mouth, and drips a single drop into Bethys' hair.

The Widow lies awake. The perpetual lights of the city, street lamps, neon bar signs, and the fluorescent ceilings of a thousand office buildings are muted now by continuous snowfall. The first light of morning creates a strange, opaque illumination. It passes through her imported lace curtains and lays narrow, filigreed panels of stenciled light across her bed. They stretch onto the walls and up onto the ceiling.

The absence of sound from the always busy street below increases the Widow's anxiety, the persistent gnaw that started when the mother and child moved across the hallway. The Widow became obsessed, her sleep fitful, her routines unsatisfying. She pulled her feet from the blankets and frowned as her sleeping socks touched the drafty floor. A plow moves slowly through a valley of white that is the street. It passes the building without a sound and vanishes into the whiteness. The Widow shudders.

The baby's tiny cry wafts through the silence, creeping under her door.

The cry is louder in the kitchen. The Widow fills a copper teapot for her morning cup when the clock radio on top of the refrigerator suddenly turns on; she jumps. The teapot clatters into the sink. Instead of her soft morning music, the excited voice of a

forecaster is warning that the city is all but shut down. "DO NOT ATTEMPT TO TRAVEL!" he warns. Inspecting the teapot, she finds two minor dents on the handle. The Widow doesn't drop things. She retrieves polish from under the sink and rubs the handle frantically. When she turns on the hot water to rinse away the polish, it's ice cold.

The baby's cries intensify. There is desperation in the tiny wail. The Widow can't concentrate; she abandons the teapot and rushes to the door, putting her ear to it. She hopes to hear something more than crying. Her mind is flooding with scenes of imagined neglect. She's sure a man is in there. She leaves the door, stomps to her telephone table, and picks up the phone. There is a faint ringing from the apartment below.

"Hello," the landlord's voice is sleepy.

"Why is it so cold in here?"

"Good Morning," he says.

"I have no hot water," she yells, "again."

"It's the storm." He tries to appease her. "That old boiler's doin' the best it can, ma'am."

"You know I hate being cold,"

"This is an old build...."

She cuts him off. Hysteria edging her words. "That woman across the hall?" she shouts, "that child has been crying all night."

"I know," he says, "we hear the baby."

"You must do something about it!" She slams the phone down before he can respond. The receiver rattles around and flops onto the table. She slams it down again, this time using both hands.



Minutes of the child's crying feel like hours. The Widow paces, sleeping socks gliding on polished floors, gleaming and discordant in the decaying building. She waits, anguished, for the landlord's footsteps. A large, garish portrait of her and her late husband hangs next to the door; she stops pacing and glares. The company had commissioned it upon his promotion to vice president. From inside an expensive mahogany frame, his "Million Man" pin glints in gold brush strokes from his lapel. She wore a gray business suit; even though she never did business. She did wife, good wife, polished and tractable wife, through countless lonely nights and unexpectedly delayed "business trips." Fifteen years into the marriage, he finally convinced her they were better off without children, she learned to stifle her yearnings, she kept away from babies, refused to look at giggling children swarming shopping carts at the Stop and Shop.

When the heart attack stymied his escapades and left him drooling and immobile on top of his final mistress, she made his arrangements dressed in black Saint Laurent. When he went into the ground, she did not cry; she wore dark glasses instead and packed her loneliness between his cold body and the crisp satin pleats. She stayed the course. A perfect widow. A sudden wave of resentment overtook her. White stockings on tiptoes, she tears the painting from its hook, turns it around, and slams it against the wall.

Morning burns through the misty overcast and lightens her apartment, washes over her expensive furniture. The landlord's heavy steps echo up the stairs. Breathing heavily from her tirade, the Widow holds her breath and listens. Then, she hurries to the door and cracks it open. The baby's cries rush in with a piercing hysteria that scares her. The landlord knocks. Suddenly aware that she hasn't changed from her nightclothes, she looks down at her bare legs and the sleeping socks, she imagines her hair, freed from the

daily knot, flowing and wild—another knock.

“Ma’am,” the landlord calls. For a moment, the Widow considers hurrying to change, make herself presentable. Instead, she moves out onto the landing. There is no answer, nothing except the urgent crying. He pounds on the door. Nothing. The Widow walks as if she were being pulled and stands behind him. “Ma’am,” he calls loudly, “I’m going to have to come in.” He searches the keyring and pushes the one marked 2B into the lock.

Sunlight pours through the windows in brilliant narrow streams. A single ray of light lies over the chair, over the mother and her child. The presence of people calms the baby. Exhausted, she falls asleep. The quiet is deafening. The landlord and the Widow are motionless in the doorway. Minutes pass before the landlord takes a shaky step forward. The sound of his boot hitting the floor stops him; he pulls it back and starts again, gently.

The landlord towers over them for a moment. Slowly, carefully, he reaches for the woman's neck, then instantly pulls away. His shoulders slump, his large body deflating, he shuffles back to the door and pulls out his phone. The Widow hears him speak. She hears the sorrow in his deep voice, but she cannot move, as if something has jarred loose inside her, split the tendons from her bones. She watches specks of dust float through the beams of stark light. It swirls around in the narrow panels and frosts the edges of the mother’s hair golden.

Finally, the Widow moves, eyes scanning the apartment, the stained floors, the kitchen's beat-up cabinetry. Similar tooled woodwork, pristine and gleaming in her apartment, is dull and damaged, large chunks missing. The result of countless transient

tenants. A single door-less closet holds a few of the mother's worn garments. There is no artwork, no photographs hanging on the walls, just yellowed wallpaper curling at the edges. In the corner, there is a small makeshift bedroom.

A beat-up crib and small dresser with an opened drawer get the Widow's attention. It is mounded over with colorful baby clothes, out of place in the dull room like the wayward blossoms of wildflowers pushing through sidewalk cracks in the spring. The Widow lifts a tiny white dress out of the drawer. *Elizabeth* is embroidered across the bodice in pink. There is a cotton sleeper, cuffs, and collar edged in colored red roses. The stitches are slightly irregular, done by hand. The Widow searches through the stacks of neatly folded baby clothes. All of them are decorated with flowers or little animals. Some say Elizabeth, others Bethy.

The landlord mumbles something. The Widow does not respond; she does not hear him. He watches her move mechanically, disconnected. She lifts the coat from the floor, folds it carefully, and places it on the bed then strokes the rough wool. A faint moaning of sirens fills the room.

The Widow moves slowly toward the mother. Her black hair is matted over her breast, pressed taut against her face. The baby is tangled in it. Tiny fingers and toes wrapped in the knotted mass. Carefully, the Widow begins to pull the strands away from the mother's face; she releases the tiny clenched fists and then her toes. The Widow stares, studying the two of them, drinking them in, the mother and child. They look alike. Thick lashes clustered at the edges of identically shaped eyes, they share the same full mouth. The Widow wipes her eyes, trying to see through the haze that fogs her vision, struggling to breathe against the weight that is crushing her chest. She desperately wants

to see them now, to remember the fragile beauty.

The sirens close in, cutting the air in crisp, urgent blasts. The baby stirs, her face instantly twists in panic. A distraught cry shatters the silence. Hands trembling, the Widow reaches into the mother's rigid, cradling arms.

Bethy sobs, lamenting the long night onto the Widow's shoulder. The Widow rubs her back. She gently shushes her. Bethy grips the Widow's nightgown. The warmth of the tiny body overwhelms the Widow, it weakens her knees. The sirens, blaring now, have come to a stop in front of the building. Muffled voices and radio static mix with the clatter of the first responders as they head up the stairs. Barely audible above the racket is Victoria's panicked voice and the scurrying of her slippered feet.

Victoria's mouth drops open when she reaches the door.

"Henry, Henry, oh my..."

The landlord sweeps her aside. Tenants open their doors; some gather on the landing, others peer from the cracked open doors of their apartments. A policeman reaches the landlord first. He stretches his big arm across the doorway.

"Please," he says, looking back at the Widow, "give her a minute."

The Widow pulls Bethy close, wraps herself around the baby, and falls to her knees. A brilliant, crystalline beam of light lays across them, the mother, the Widow, and the child. She leans into the dead woman's ear. A strand of the mother's hair clings to the Widow's cheek in an endless stream of tears.

"Forgive me," she whispers.

The End