

Drowning in Uptown

“Come down to the basement, and I’ll give you a bottle.” And so she followed him down to the basement, slowly because of his bruised, swollen foot that thumped, thumped its landing on every wooden porch step.

Weird Mike wasn’t evil. He was just a strange, older man who lived quietly in the basement unit of their apartment and mostly kept to himself. Still, she had never gone down to the basement for a reason, and with every thump of Mike’s broken foot she tried to think of another reason to turn back upstairs.

She needed the bottle of draino though, and he said he had some to give, which was kind of him. Wasn’t it? She texted her roommates, who were both at work, that she was headed down to the basement with Mike. “In case you need to find my body later,” she added, laughingly, but honestly hoped this wasn’t the text that would show up on Dateline.

The basement was a dark, cavernous chamber. She stared forward only, not daring to look into any of the doorways they passed. In the bathroom, he had no shower curtain, no toothbrush or toothpaste, there was only an off-white, aging bar of soap resting on the back of the toilet.

There were at least three ghosts in their apartment on the third floor. She thought mostly it was her fault the ghosts were active, she made them act out somehow. She remembered, was reminded of brutally, the months following her mother’s sudden death when she and an ex bought a ouija board from a thrift store outside of Mobile, Alabama and used it to try to call her mother. Her mother never answered of course, but others did, and even after she burned the

board, buried its ashes deep in the woods, the door she tried to shut swung open, back and forth, taking and leaving wherever she went.

And so, it was her fault the ghosts in the third floor apartment couldn't sleep. The woman in her bedroom had died there, she told her, of a stroke. And she watched each of them now when they walked through the entryway, sat in the living room, but watched her, most of all, when she slept. She tried to paint the old, dead woman many times, tried different palettes, different textures, but none of them captured the pain in the woman's head, the throbbing, heartbeat in her skull.

The teenaged boy was the most pleasant of the ghosts. Not haunting as much as annoying, he turned on the television, the microwave, the fan in the living room. His haunting was maybe more about his comfort than anything else. She only ever saw him lounging on the brown, curry-stained sofa, in wrinkled, oversized t-shirts and baggy jeans. He never told her when he died or why he was still there, and she never asked. She enjoyed it when he came to hang out.

The other ghost was of a little girl, and she is still not completely sure it was a ghost at all. The little girl could be seen in the pantry, scratching at the wall to her roommate's closet. The scratching at night kept them up sometimes, but there was no conversing with the little girl. The girl just stared if they dared look into the pantry, and scratched her tiny child claws down the length of the wall. She wasn't human.

Weird Mike reached under his sink cabinet and pulled out an old, dusty bottle of draino, the label and instructions faded and scratched off.

"You know how to use it?" He looked up at her, one eye shut.

She only nodded, looked quickly back down the basement hallway, and thought of how quickly she could run.

“Let me know if you three need anything.” Mike pushed himself back up to a stooped, hunched version of standing.

She nodded again, dumbly, fumbled through her dry throat to open her mouth and breathe out a thank you.

Upstairs again she texted her roommates that she was alive and could unclog the drain now.

She worked early mornings at the craft store, unpacking and stocking supplies before the doors opened. She woke up at 2 or 3 in the morning and swallowed down a smushy granola bar and glass of water before running to the red line on Morse Ave. She ran not because she was late, but because it was dark and the streets were empty. Or worse, were not empty some mornings, but were populated by the shadows of men fumbling down alleys reaching long-lined arms and stretched fingers for her hair, her wrists, her waist. And she ran up the stairs at the El Station and stood, huddled against the wind in the one well-lit heated area, shaking her ankles, knees, and self awake while her eyes sagged, shut.

On the train she tried to find the busiest car. Sometimes there were other women, nurses, house cleaners, workers and servers of others, that she felt would watch for her when any of the shadow men sat too near. Off the train she ran, again, the two city blocks through Uptown to the loading dock of the craft store where she leapt up the concrete stairs and to her locker. At work she kept her head down, cut open boxes of craft supplies and lined them up on the shelves. At the end of her shift, around 8 am, the sun was up and she walked out the front

door into the city where everyone was finally awake, and she walked home slowly to go to sleep.

There was an elderly couple that lived in the apartment next door to hers, whose bedroom window stared back into her own, and she heard them every morning at 9:30 am handcuff each other and scream, pounding sex for exactly 24 minutes. Then she would roll over back to sleep at 9:54 and wake up at noon. She drank stale coffee her roommates left in the pot and sat on the back porch with peanut butter toast and bag of popcorn.

She watched the elderly couple garden in their small plot of grass against the blue-painted garage. She waved to the woman who smiled up at her. In the purple folding chair she curled her feet up underneath her and read novels she pulled from free little libraries and abandoned boxes on sidewalks. She read voraciously but absentmindedly, letting the words slip and slide through her brain and mix with the stories from other books until her eyes got tired or the sun burnt too hot on her shoulders, and she went back inside to sleep again.

On Tuesday nights she rode the El downtown and back, never really going anywhere, but watching the river underneath her and through the city, and she'd think of the boat that sank in the river a century before. She'd imagine diving into the river, swimming out to the lake or freezing to death, either goal worth imagining. And she sketched the lights of the city, the vague shapes of buildings, and clouded faces of other passengers. And when a man offered her nightshade she shook her head no, but sketched the needle going into his arm.

She picked up pizza or a hot beef sandwich and ate on the front steps of her building. She listened to the woman next door, who lived on possibly the second floor, though she wasn't sure, as she told her about ex husbands and now-grown children and drank from a pitcher of sangria. Her roommates joined with similar grease-stained bags of food at random times of ended shifts, and the four smoked and watched the lazy sun puddle behind the 7-11 on the corner.

On these nights, she sometimes left and slept instead with the man she'd met at a bookstore three years before. His studio smelled of ashtrays and mold, and the bed he fucked her on sagged and leaned to the right just enough to roll her in weightless imbalance. He had a cat named Patricia after his dead wife, who watched her with suspicion and slept in her clothes piled on the floor. In the mornings after, he made her burnt coffee on his hot plate and stirred in cocoa powder, then sat on the hardwood floor gazing up at her bent frame in his bed. He prayed to her it felt like, though he never said anything religious, and their conversations lulled in spaces of restful oblivion, meaningless utterances that washed over her and out of her feet when she walked home.

For her roommate's birthday, she baked a confetti cake and coated it generously in pastel pink frosting. Lit candles and carried the monstrosity carefully into the dining room turned painting studio, where friends from work and guys from bars sat, some in chairs, most on the floor, a few on the table, where she set the cake down. Her roommate blew out candles to cheers, and she cut thick slices to pass around on paper plates.

They ate and then smoked and listened silently to music turn and roll out of the record player, etching itself into the walls, into the scratches made by the little girl from the pantry. And she watched each of the people in the room as strangers, shadows and lights, beating individual

heartbeats and invisible breaths into the space, where the world turned too slow for her to feel and too fast for her to rest.