

Follower

The landlord gushes over the apartment, the open floor plan, the vaulted roof, spins across the hardwood with arms outstretched and her jaw slack in ecstasy, but I'm frozen on the threshold, eyes locked on the ceiling, my heart swimming into my throat at the sight of the woman in the rafters.

She crouches on an exposed joist above the kitchen, smudged by shadow in the prism of space below the peaked roof. A greasy column of raven hair shrouds her face. Pale arms extend from a formless garment. The Followers are still going crazy over this stunning apartment, sending Responses of hearts and clapping hands. I stumble against the counter.

“What is this?” I whisper.

The landlord arches a painted eyebrow.

“You must mean the architecture,” she snarls. “You must mean the open-truss ceiling designed by the inimitable Talbert Godfrey, god-rest-his-soul, because if there is something else to which you might be referring then maybe, young man, maybe you're unaware of what's called

‘polite conversation,’ and maybe I expect a certain level of ‘tact’ and ‘sophistication’ from my tenants. So that must be what you mean, yes?”

The Followers have gone silent. I stammer apologies. I’m new to the city, I say, and I don’t know what’s right. I love the apartment. It is beautiful. It is available. I belong here. Her face softens and she chuckles in a way that implies that I have committed some sort of antic. Tentative Responses flutter into view, some hearts, some thumbs.

Through the rest of the tour I smile and radiate nonchalance, and I don’t even mind the toes of the woman in the ceiling, how they’re horribly curled around that joist, knuckles shiny like the worn knob of a walking stick.

I sign the lease with my new lavish signature and the landlord and I share the rush of Responses, champagne sparkles in our brains, and we laugh and shake hands. Welcome to the city, she says, so glad you made it.

Back at Hassan’s apartment, I pack my bedding from his couch as he pretends to mope at the loss of his week-long roommate. He slouches away and returns with a square of toilet paper and says, Remember me by this, and the Followers love it.

“Is it the apartment of your dreams?” he asks as we look at furniture online. “Minus being chased by wolves and all of that awesome Freudian stuff with your mom?”

“Well, there was this thing.” I’m hesitant to say it aloud, as if that would make it true. “In the ceiling? There was this—“

“Know what I love most about this city?” Hassan is smiling but his eyes dagger into mine. “How it welcomes you with open arms. It doesn’t care who we’ve been or how small our

town was, or how long it took you to work up the guts to join me here. It's been waiting for us. Patient. And now you can really be someone. Or you can wallow and look for flaws. I love that."

I purse my lips and look for couches while my heart sinks into that small, unseen place where it always lived back in our podunk hometown. Some negative Responses peter into view, frowns and a vegetable resembling a penis. We brood and the bad Responses accumulate and snowball until Hassan pulls us out with a hilarious story about barfing on a plane.

On the ride to my new apartment we pass slums with caved-in roofs and boarded windows, and Hassan puts an arm around my shoulder and says that someday, son, all of this will be yours. In the space of two blocks the neighborhood abruptly turns clean and loft-abundant. We pull up to my building, which is split symmetrically, two walks, two doors, my apartment and someone else's.

"Good gravy!" Hassan drops my bag on the island of the open-concept kitchen. "To find this? For a studio? That ceiling, that architecture! You did good, man."

The woman still crouches in the ribcage of exposed joists, facing the kitchen wall. I watch Hassan as he admires the vaulted ceiling, eyes tracing the beams toward the kitchen, where his gaze ticks to a halt and his eyelids draw back. His grin falters.

"See?" I whisper, but he has already looked away. He grins at the floor and does a clap-and-spin move that gets his Responses flowing.

Delivery men arrive and place the new couch in an algorithmically Feng Shui position in the center of the open apartment, which seems inconvenient and terrible to me but my Followers like it, so I pay the men and they leave. Hassan and I assemble the couch legs in a tense silence,

and then he abruptly remembers that he needs to go home. I'm left alone with my bags and my island couch in a sea of bare hardwood.

That night I message Claire about the new apartment and she suggests a housewarming party in her ironic-but-secretely-excited tone. I can rely on Claire. She used to build our bonfires in high school, kick out party crashers, mercifully shut down my misguided puka-shell necklace phase. Claire knows the right thing to do. Claire knows how to be.

I agree to the party breezily, like it's a book I might read. My Followers release a flock of kazoos and balloons. The sun has set. I glance at the kitchen and cold liquid runs over me.

The woman no longer faces the wall. Her head hangs limp, but she's turned toward me.

Sleep is difficult. The glow of my lone lamp barely grazes her perch above the kitchen, but I leave it on and trudge through the night, burrowed in throw pillows.

In the morning, while rinsing my cereal bowl I glance at the woman and receive a burst of negative Responses, middle fingers and purple beakers marked with crossbones. I have to look away to simmer them down.

I wander my new neighborhood past crowded brewpubs with chrome tables, consignment shops, inexplicable hipster boutiques that sell only handmade buttons. I stop in a rustic cafe full of bearded men and wait casually as the tattooed barista takes nine minutes to brew a single cup of black coffee. Something about the way he drains the beans.

I write a large tip—big, loopy handwriting, exclamation points—and the Responses flurry into view like so many butterflies in front of a lawnmower.

I puzzle over the schedule at a bus stop, nodding and clucking my tongue for the audience of a woman in scrubs who waits on the bench, sighing down into her grocery bags. The bus starts

moving while I struggle with the payment and I stumble to a seat amongst the drowsy weirdos. I slouch and make myself drowsy, too. A fairy glint of sunlight reflects off the bus and dances across the restaurants and record stores. I'm really here. All of this time it's been waiting for me. My city. I belong. I'm somebody. I suddenly have to fight down tears.

A fast-food worker at the front of the bus starts mumbling about an untied shoe, louder and louder until he's shouting through cupped hands in a crazy-person way, and I gaze out the window as if I'm used to mental illness on the bus. The guy finally gets off, shaking his head. When I reach my stop I trip on my shoelace and tumble down the steps onto the sidewalk.

Walking up to my apartment, I glance at the neighbor's identical door. Maybe I will invite them to the housewarming. We will inevitably be close friends. City friends. We will chat in a slight city accent as we sit on the stoop in the glow of autumn. We will crack jokes. I will introduce them to Leinenkugels.

When I step inside and remember the woman, poison seeps into my day. I refuse to look at her as I assemble and burn a grilled cheese, throwing spatulas around a bit harder than necessary. I haven't done anything wrong, and yet here is this problem, like a raspberry seed in my teeth. I watch TV and stew as night descends.

The furnace hums under my TV trance, show after show. At some point the hum grows louder and noses into my attention. A realization swims up that it's not the furnace but the my own voice humming, two notes, up and down, and then that the voice isn't mine.

I pause the show and all is quiet. I steal a peek at the kitchen. A plug pulls from a drain in my gut. The ceiling is vacant.

I slip off the sofa and crouch, panting, scanning the shadowy apartment, the corners, up to the rafters, tilting back, back.

She's coiled on the joist above me, six feet from my head. Her hair sways from movement, a pendulum coming to rest.

Once my Followers are dormant, I pretend to sleep and watch her through my eyelashes. She's tiny against the expanse of ceiling, caged by the joists. A bit sad, really. My fear recedes into regular, everyday willies.

The next day is filled with party preparations, food orders, crepe paper, fretting over my lack of chairs. I recall the city parties that I witnessed from afar in my small town—violet light, neon cocktails, pierced nipples, sleek skin like gloss balloons. Even Claire, who I had never thought beautiful, suddenly beautiful. And if even Claire, then even me.

The woman watches from above the couch, pathetic in daylight like a poorly camouflaged bird. I eat lunch at the kitchen island and she suddenly appears above me, squatting over the dangling pendant lights. I tilt my screen so she can watch TV with me, a little sister spying from a staircase. I accidentally glance at her and the Followers burst out a stream of daggers and flames and I shake my head and smile until the Responses improve.

Claire arrives early with her seemingly identical roommates, who squeal about the architecture and shuffle around with their cheeks pressed together, searching for a selfie composition.

“Sweet digs, bro,” Claire says, punching my shoulder, shrugging out of a leather coat. “You're finally in the city! You really did it. Honestly, I was worried you were just gonna hem and haw and complain until you were forty and then say that it was too—”

Her eyes are rapt on the ceiling. Her lips part in horror. She backs against the fridge.

“Right?” I hiss. “I should’ve warned you. What is this? What do I do?”

Claire is dumbfounded. The woman crouches above the giggling roommates like thunder ready to clap. Claire shakes her head at the floor, and when she looks back up, it’s all blinked away.

“Do? A welcome-home shot is what you do.”

She lugs a plastic handle of peach vodka onto the counter and begins lining up whipped cream, sprinkles, tepid cans of strawberrita, and I watch from afar as the Followers flood the space between us with baby pandas and cupcakes. Claire doesn’t meet my eyes as she hands out the shots. Mascara crumbs beneath her eyebrow. I didn’t know she wore mascara.

“Welcome to the city!” the roommates cry, raising their shots. “So glad you made it.”

The shared Responses pour in, and I have never seen so much love in all of my life.

Guests arrive, friends of my friends, and I immediately forget all of their names. Thirty people mill about my sparse apartment. No one mentions the woman lurking in the ceiling, eerily photo-bombing the selfies. Everyone glistens with Responses and sips alcoholic sparkling water. I tag along with Claire in conversations, nod and laugh. I’m being too quiet. No, I’m mysterious and extra-thoughtful in my quietude.

A restaurant delivers chicken fingers and dates wrapped in bacon. Music blares from portable speakers that someone had thought to bring. I wonder if my neighbor can hear us through the wall. Claire holds a bag of red wine and makes me drink from the spout. I laugh and cough dark speckles onto the floor as everyone cheers and our Followers send winks and puke faces.

Hassan bursts through the door wearing socks and slides across the hardwood. Everyone cheers their favorite sitcom neighbor. He does a goofy chicken dance, pumping up the trough of

Responses. Nonstop Responses, percolating. Tears spring to my eyes. We're so young, so beautiful. A nostalgic moment, already filtered with grainy saturation. Hassan grabs me in a headlock and parades me around the room shouting, "This guy! This guy!"

I skate past joyful faces and Responses blur my vision like a blizzard in headlights.

We ride golden flows. I'm absorbed in conversation with a roommate, who is less beautiful out of the light, but she's sweet and funny. She's giggling at me. I giggle back. We haven't really said anything in a few minutes. I look around the room and no one is actually speaking, only swaying to music and gazing at each other in adoration.

This party is good. I am good. I shiver. The roommate is still giggling. Shadows flutter behind my belly button.

Hassan leaps into the center of the room, drops to the floor, and breakdances terribly. We form a clapping circle. Hassan offers his butt for us to spank, and we do. The music swells. Hassan shimmies, bouncing massive invisible breasts, and the crowd cheers. His eyes are wild with Responses. He humps a chair. We howl. He falls to the floor and pantomimes a tender and intricate sex act. We lose it. He hops up, grabs the wine bag and squeezes it like bagpipes, spraying wine up, up, through purple air, where it showers the woman in the ceiling.

My blood drains. The music dips beneath the floor. Red flecks drip from the woman's toes. Her arms jolt up at right angles, fingers spread, feet rotated grotesquely outward on the joist. Her head tilts back. Wine trickles down her wrists. A Pompeiian stance of frozen horror.

They're still dancing, dancing.

"Wait!" I shout into the wind of music. "Everyone! Something's wrong!"

She scuttles to another joist, strikes the same rigid pose. Her movements are unnaturally fast, a flip-book with missing frames. Hair webs her mouth as it wrenches open in a silent scream. The Responses darken my eyes, diesel smoke, clawed hands.

“Something is happening!”

The dancing stops. The Responses cut out. When I look down, the guests have gone rigid, fists clenched at their sides. They stare at the floor as their faces contort in concentration. I cannot take another breath.

With a collective inhale, each guest suddenly leaps into the air. Their feet slam the floor, and the knot that held the party breaks loose.

Shrieks and crashing feet. Rolling beer cans vomit foam. A tidal wave of Responses. Fireworks, shooting stars, fists, lips, teeth—everything they can give us, the Followers give. I turn wild-eyed to the woman in the ceiling, shaking in her terrible pose, but the Responses turn on me like a school of metallic fish, shards in my eyes, daggers and bullets and blood. I stagger between partiers. Claire’s hands are on my shoulders. She’s dancing me. The Responses sweep my thoughts away. The current pulls me under.

I slam against dancing bodies. Claire whirls me. She clutches my head and kisses me. I laugh into her mouth. Hassan is here, hands on me, hands on a roommate’s breasts, his panicked animal eyes. We jump and dance. We are the writhing core of the universe. I’m kissing a roommate, I’m kissing Hassan, and then the current pulls me somewhere deeper, where there’s no light.

I wake near dawn, facedown on the couch, to the humming voice. Two notes, up and down. My body hollows. I turn over to face the ceiling.

She climbs down from the rafters along the cords of the kitchen island lights, her eyes glinting through the dark and locked on me, her elbows and knees contorting like insect joints. She crawls down humming through a tight smile, groping blindly, all of her focus on me. She lowers a palm to the countertop.

Air hisses in my throat. My Followers are gone. I scramble against the arm of the couch. She squats on the island, tense, silhouetted in the gloom. The hum stops. We watch each other. She suddenly lurches off the counter and dives into the shadow of the apartment floor.

I fling the sheet over my head and cower. The only sound is my hot breath against the sheet. Polyester, suffocating, stretched like skin over my body. It shivers in my hands.

Her hair brushes the sheet over my face. A whimper ekes from my throat.

She snorts and leaps off the couch and her feet slap the hardwood. Beer cans clatter. I clutch the fabric and breathe my hot recycled air. She scuttles invisibly around the apartment, picking at the party debris.

My heart leaps at every scurry, every shattering glass. But when the sounds continue and grow repetitive, the shock begins to dull. I breathe slower under the sheet. I'm safe here in the dark.

Dawn must come soon. She will return to the ceiling and I can sneak out of the door. I will escape to the beard cafe and drink perfect coffee and sit by the plate-glass window, and the overcast light outside will wash the sidewalks, reveal the city's pores. I will take the bus home and stand before my apartment, and then I will walk to my neighbor's door. She will open a bit warily. She will be a few years older, wiser, pretty. I will ask her about the woman in my ceiling.

Her eyes will light. She will glance over her shoulder into her apartment, at her own ceiling, turn back to me, and place a finger across her lips.

For now, the only thing to do is breathe beneath the sheet, as the woman clatters out in the dark, and the sounds begin to fade as sleep comes for me. Sleep, it always comes.