

The Attic

*A candy-colored clown they call the sandman
Tiptoes to my room every night
Just to sprinkle stardust and to whisper
"Go to sleep. Everything is all right..."*

-Roy Orbison

I adopted a boy.

My nephew. His mom and dad were busted for drug possession (again), but I won't get into that yet.

I was thirty-eight years old and had no plans for children of my own, but with our parents dead and gone, I couldn't let my own flesh and blood end up in a foster home. Plus, my big sister and I were close growing up. The legal proceedings were quick—mostly because I was the only living, non-incarcerated family member left with a job—so he spent less than a week in the system.

I bought a few of the parenting books to prepare, one even called *The Godfathering*. I came out of them all with the homogenized premise that you will never have complete control over your kid, but you do what you can. Love the hell out of them. That sort of thing.

I did pretty well as a graphic designer and painter. I was working from home as a contracted freelancer so there was no need to pay for a babysitter or daycare. I lived in

Wicker Park, a neighborhood in Chicago. It's young and had enough galleries to keep me in touch with the art scene. I'd even do a show now and then and offload a few paintings.

My bar-hopping nights had slowed greatly with the kid, but I didn't mind. Crusty old white people and dehydration don't mix, and I found I got more looks from dudes while I was pushing around Gary's stroller; *Hey daddy* here or a *Damn, daddy!* there. I'd be lying if said I wasn't looking for an excuse to visit the gay bars and dance clubs less; I no longer wished to wear my hangovers like a crown; I didn't want to wake up dead, coke still on my nose, molly washing over me one last time as I wake at noon, taking everything good about last night with it... if was lucky enough to remember last night, that is.

Gary forced my hand in the best way.

Gary was chill, named after my Dad. However, he was not at all like my dad; He smiled a lot, never cried, and already had a knack for art at a little older than two, just like his Uncle Jack. He doodled on computer paper, and some of what he came up with could've sold at the galleries around town. At least the modern ones, anyways.

"Just like Uncle Jack," I'd tell him.

"Unker Yack," he'd say back.

About two months after he moved in, my studio had become dominated by his crib and a slew of baby toys. We needed something bigger.

I'd landed a major corporate client on a recommendation from my friend, Cathy, a fellow designer whose workload had her unable to take on anyone new. The client sells off-

brand canned goods and wanted a mascot in the hopes of becoming more *on-brand*. Or more relatable, I guess. So I Googled veggie puns designed them a character named Turnip the Beet. He held a little veggie boombox over his shoulder.

Every artist dreads the prospect of becoming a sellout. “Fuck the Man,” you know? But with a kid, you couldn’t dick around in the name of art and risk losing dough, because it didn’t just impact *you* anymore. It meant the kid wouldn’t to eat or get toys or get clothes or get a life he deserved. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made, even if it means sticking a knife into integrity’s back. Your own back, even.

“Turnip the Beet” was my surrendering to the Man. I hated it and hated myself for creating it. But I did it for the kid. He deserved it, especially after what the poor boy would go through...

But that comes later.

I presented my cartoon at the cost of artistic purity and my client fucking *loved* it. Luckily, I’d been smart enough to negotiate an extra clause or two into my contract, thanks to *Freelancing 101*, a book I’d picked up at Booklegger’s Used Books in Lakeview. Once they adopted the cartoon and slapped it on all their cans, their brand penetration went up over five percent—whatever that means—and I landed a bunch of dough in the following months as a result. With my bank account swelling for the first time ever, I decided it was time to invest in real estate—a two-bedroom apartment, perhaps. I needed the space and Gary needed his own room.

Condo hunting in Wicker Park is not normally pleasant, especially in a seller's market. Things go quickly, especially anything built post-2000, because there's not a whole lot of space for new construction.

But I wasn't looking for anything new. I was looking for *character*... or in other words, a shit hole that fell within my price range. After my parents died, I inherited a bit but felt strange touching it, less so when I got Gary. My sister gave me everything she had before prison, eternally grateful, and eternally incarcerated. I'd buy only what we needed, the rest would be Gary's. Besides, I was an artist, wasn't I? I could handle some interior design and a bucket of paint.

Chicago has a *lot* of gay realtors. You could walk outside, chuck a penny, and probably hit a bench with a gay agent's face on it. I went James Marcano, a guy who had hit me up in the past because we followed each other on Instagram and I told myself if this process was going to destroy my savings account, I at least deserved someone pretty to look at during the house hunt.

I dropped off Gary at daycare for an afternoon stint, and James met soon after at a bar called O'Malley's. Fact: There are as many Irish bars in Chicago as there are gay real estate agents. Blond with lighter features, he sat across from in his athleisurewear polo, showing off the muscles I was slowly parting with on my own body.

"So what are you looking for?" James asked after we'd exchanged pleasantries and the beers came.

“At least a two-bed, one bath,” I said. “Not sure if you’ve heard, but I adopted my sister’s kid.”

“Wow,” he said from a far-off place, his own Peter-Pan lifestyle flashing before his eyes. “That’s so... *adult* of you.” He smiled. “I like it, *daddy*. And I think I have the perfect place.”

He gave me a ride home in his Range Rover, but not before knocking a percentage point off his commission and giving me head.

Call it a gay handshake.

He sent me listing for the place, old Victorian gray stone converted into condos. Gary and I met James there the next day. It was a Fall afternoon, leaves burning bright reds and oranges just before winter snuffed them out and we Midwesterners hole up inside for months, telling ourselves we *love the seasons!*

I got out of the taxi and fell in love with its dark, pointy beauty. It stood between two brand new three-story walk-ups, dull and boxy, that only seemed to make its gothic presence pop.

“Cassow!” Gary yelled, pointing at the round spire window. *Castle!*

“Let’s take a look, shall we?”

James pulled a set of keys from his coat pocket and let us inside. We were ushered us into the makeshift foyer and we took the stairs. They groaned something deep and old under my feet. Gary did his best to climb them as I held him steady with one hand.

“Ms. Southwell lives on the first floor,” he turned around and said, having beat us to the top. “Nice old lady. Used to be a music teacher. She lives alone, her husband passed last year.”

“Sorry to hear that,” I said reflexively.

“Very kind couple. Mr. Southwell was a wonderful artist.”

“You know her?”

“Yeah, a bit. I’ve helped her find renters in the past. She owns this place, by the way. Doesn’t want to deal with the upkeep of an extra unit anymore.”

There was a small, carpeted landing at the top of the stairs. The double doors were tall and skinny, maybe once the entrance to a parlor. He entered the code into the lockbox that hung from the door knob and retrieved the key. As he pushed both doors inward, the hinges howled with age.

We walked in and the first thing I noticed was how old it smelled. It had been converted to an open concept kitchen and living area, thank God. The kitchen had been remodeled at some point in the last ten years, but that looked to be all. Between ornate floor and ceiling moldings were walls caked with layer after layer of paint. In some spots, there were gouges that revealed three or four different colors, each coat with its own story to tell.

We saw the primary bedroom first, if you could call it that. There was no closet space and the small, attached bathroom was in dire need of updating. The shower head came to my chest and the tub was hardly worthy of the name.

We moved into the spire room. No closet space, but open and well-lit. Gary waddled to the window. "Cassow!" he shouted again.

At the far end, there was a string connected to an attic door. At its end was a gaudy red crystal.

"Can I take a look in the attic?" I shouted over my shoulder.

"Uh..." he hesitated. "Sure, be my guest."

I pulled on the crystal, half-expecting God-knows-what to come crashing down, but the door fell open and the stairs slid down slowly without a sound. They stunk of grease. Globbs of it were spread onto the hinges and tracks.

"Can you keep an eye on him for a minute?" I asked him.

"Sure."

I climbed the half-stairs, half-ladder and stepped into the cold, hazy space. Once my eyes adjusted to the low lighting, I could stand at full height in the middle of floor, the roof sloping on either side. It looked to extend back toward the master bedroom.

The floor had been painted with a large, ornate moon, covered in craters, and surrounded by stars that were less detailed. They looked as though a child had drawn

them, perfect in shape but crafted with the pentagon method you learn in grade school. A toy car and an action figure had been left behind.

I was standing in a child's playroom, a perfect hideout for Gary once he got a bit older. Visions of weed, beer and slow-loading gay porn jpeg's entered my head.

Do not become Mom.

At the far end, beneath the opaque window, was one of those old record player cabinets. It looked to be mid-century, boxy with woven speaker covers. I was drawn to it. It wasn't one of those new recreations you could pick up at Urban Outshitters or Snottery Barn. This thing was legit.

I ran my fingers across the walnut top. There was a fine layer of dust and half a child's handprint on the front edge. I lifted the lid from under those small fingers, not much bigger than Gary's. A record, Roy Orbison's *In Dreams*, was on the turntable. The needle was sitting on the vinyl, so I gently lifted it back onto the rest.

"Pretty old thing, isn't it?"

"I beg your pardon?!" I said dramatically and spun around.

James laughed. "Not you, the record player."

"Is Gary okay?"

"Yeah, I can see him from here. He's sitting on the floor, quite enamored with his shoe lace."

“I’ve spent nearly on a grand on toys for the kid and none of it compares to the magic of a string or a box. He’s like a little cat.”

We went back down to the kitchen to regroup.

“I’m interested,” I said. “What are next steps?”

“Come on” he said. “I’d like to introduce you to Mrs. Southwell.”

“Uh, isn’t that a bit strange?” I asked. “Meeting the current owner?”

“We don’t have a choice. She *insisted* on it.”

I scooped up Gary and we moved back downstairs. I set him back on the floor and said, “Knock, knock!” He knocked on the door twice and giggled something fierce. The door almost immediately squealed open, like we were expected.

“Hello, dear!” Mrs. Southwell smiled big pearly white veneers. She had wispy white hair that fell past her shoulders. The wrinkles around her dark eyes and mouth placed her in her seventies or eighties.

“Hi Mrs. Southwell, I’d like you to meet your new neighbors.”

I gave James a sharp look.

“*Potential* new neighbors,” he corrected.

I introduced myself and she bent down to Gary’s level.

“And who’s this?”

“Gawwy!” he shouted. *Gary!* They smiled at each other.

She held out her hands to pick him up, but hesitated a moment and asked me, “May I?”

“Sure.”

She hoisted him up without any trouble and he placed a finger on her nose. “I *nose* you now,” he said. One of mine. We all laughed, especially the old woman.

“Please come in,” she said. “I’ve just ground fresh coffee. Have a seat, have a seat.”

The entry opened up into the living room. She whisked Gary away into the kitchen, not open in concept, and James and I sat on the couch. I was mildly uncomfortable and anxious about the apartment, but I supposed this was a good thing. I could get a feel for my downstairs neighbor and—to be blunt—whether or not she was nuts, a legit concern in a big city where everyone is crawling on top of each other.

I also realized a complete stranger had taken Gary into a room alone. I was still getting used to this dad thing. As I looked to the kitchen and started to get up, James put a hand on my leg and said, “Don’t worry, she’s harmless.”

The room was warm. Too warm, as most old folks’ places are, so I removed my coat. It smelled of potpourri and age and reminded me of visiting my grandparents in Michigan, pleasant memories tainted with decline and death, like my mother cutting the mold off cheese my grandmother would set out for us because she could no longer see. *Eat it!* my mother would hiss under her breath. *You’ll embarrass her!*

Paintings were everywhere. James was right about the deceased husband. He was good. Nearly all of them were of the night sky, stars and moons, nothing like Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, though. These were more geometric. Some even had the same patterns. Astrological patterns. Constellations that hovered around the moon. The painting on the attic floor was clearly from the deceased and the record player could've once been the Southwells'.

Where there weren't paintings, there were books. Loads and loads of books, everything from *The Joy Luck Club* to *The Shining*, *Bouchard's Biblical Analyses* to *Darkness from Beyond the Veil*. Under the far window was an upright piano, black and glossy.

The old woman came into the room, one hand walking Gary, the other holding a French press out and away, another indicator she was probably a mother. Gary held up a cookie at me like a trophy.

"Up!" he shouted, and Mrs. Southwell lifted him one-handed onto the opposing couch where began going to town on his treat. Strong old woman. She returned to the kitchen for cups, saucers, cream, and sugar, and placed them around the coffee table and poured. I took mine with cream, they both took theirs black.

"So tell me, Jack," Mrs. Van de Kamp said, sitting next to Gary on the opposing couch. "What do you do?"

"I'm a graphic designer. Some painting on the side if I find the time."

“Oh, lovely!” she brought her hands together and smiled, her veneered teeth not unlike piano keys. “An artist. Bless you, dear. We need them nowadays more than ever!”

I smiled. “Not everyone would agree with you, but I enjoy it and it pays the bills.”

Her smile disappeared.

“Dullards and the unimaginative will be the undoing of us all,” she said quietly and brought the coffee to her thin red lips. Her ability to gulp scalding-hot coffee reminded me of my grandmother. “Send them South with those small-minded Bible-thumpers I say. Peas in a pod.”

Her attitude changing on a dime also reminded me of my grandmother and her battle with dementia. Maybe my parents were lucky that the car accident took them quickly.

Heavy silence followed. I looked to Gary and asked, “How’s that cookie buddy?” One thing I’ve learned is that talking to babies and dogs is a great way to provide filler in awkward situations. And it turns everything cheery.

“Gary is just the *sweetest* boy,” the old woman said, glowing at him. “And his manners! He thanked me for the cookie like a gentleman. Is he yours?”

“My sister’s, actually. I’m, uh... his guardian now.”

“I see, I see,” she said, patting the air at me like she understood and no more explanation was needed, until a strange curiosity crept over her face. “Say, was the father circumcised?”

“Mrs. *Southwell*...” James said with a nervous smile, almost like an embarrassed son reprimanding an overreaching parent.

I expected her to apologize or change the subject, but she held her gaze with me.

“I have no idea.”

“Please excuse me,” she said, giggling. “Such random thoughts pop into this old head mine sometimes. What is it that you young people say? A filter? Oh that’s it, I need a filter!”

Gary laughed. They joined him. He had no idea what she meant, but he was great at picking up inflections in speech and happy tones. I was certain he’d also have a knack for diffusing weird situations, a quality I desperately wished I’d had in that moment.

“James, you see that this young man and his darling nephew get the place upstairs. I’m very flexible on price.”

“I’ll do what I can, Mrs. *Southwell*.”

“And you,” she turned to me. “When you get the place—and I’m *sure* you will—do let me watch little Gary from time to time. I so miss children around.”

“Of course.”

No chance.

For the next few weeks I was anxious but unnecessarily so. I'd already gotten pre-approval from the bank for far more than what Mrs. Southwell was asking. It was so low, I was worried she might feel I owe her something.

"She's anxious to offload it and it's exciting for her to be anywhere near a kid again," he said, sitting next to me on his couch. His place was in Lincoln Park, a newly renovated townhome you could afford with a salesman's smile and no kid. "Her daughter passed away at a young age."

"How sad," I said, immediately regretting how little emotion I'd put behind it.

"Stop," he said and put his arm around me, running his other hand up my shirt to play with my chest hair. "She doesn't want anything."

Turns out, she 'd need *everything*.

We were moved into the house in less than a month. Painting a wall is a miserable task I came to find out. I started as I would a new project for work, with thoughtfulness and attention to detail, careful with each stroke around the edges and crown-moldings, equally careful not to waste the expensive interior paint. At hour three I'd eased up a bit gotten more gratuitous with each dip of the brush or push of the roller and by hour eight, I was slopping it onto the walls.

I sat Gary on a piece of newspaper, gave him a brush and a small jar of paint. His small hand gripped the brush like a wrench and he stabbed it down into the can, wetting

the bristles and much of the handle, then, with a surprising degree of finesse, moved the brush in a single stroke across the wall.

Not too bad, I thought.

When the wall no longer interested him, he began to paint himself.

“Unker Yack, look!” He brought the wet brush straight down the middle of his face and squealed with joy. That was about the time I called it.

After a longer-than-usual bath to get rid of his racing stripe, I tucked him into his new room, unsure of how he’d handle sleeping not only in a new environment, but alone without Unker Yack in the room.

“Nigh-nigh,” he said first, before I could even bring the blanket up to his chin.

“Night night,” I said, realizing it was I that was more afraid than he was.

I stayed up a bit longer, too awake, and put back a few beers. I admired our half-assed attempt at painting from a lawn chair in the middle of the living room, still waiting on the new couch to arrive. While I couldn’t help but feel I’d only put lipstick on a pig, it was *my* place and I’d done something grown-up.

I was snapped awake sometime later.

“Bye, bye!” Gary yelled.

I'd fallen asleep in the lawn chair, for how long I didn't know. It was still very dark out. My neck was a mess. I stood groggily and went to Gary's room. He was standing in his crib, very much awake and all smiles.

"Clown!" he said, pointing at the attic.

The gaudy red crystal at the end of the string, ever so slightly, was swinging back and forth.