


THE
BOTTLE
IMP
of
BRIGHT
HOUSE

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by
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*To my family: Deb, Ben, Abel, Bizayehu,
and Genet. To all the wishes granted and all
the ones left hanging, to all the mysteries we
solved and all the ones beyond our fingertips,
to all the friends we welcomed at our kitchen
table and all the strangers we turned into
friends, to all the jokes, all the tears,
all the fires we survived, and to home.
Most of all, to home.*





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1

YOUR LAST CHANCE TO ESCAPE

THIS STORY IS 98 PERCENT TRUE.

What I mean by that, Dear Reader, is that it's just as true as I can stand to make it.

Mrs. Appleyard said everyone lies. She knew better than most. Our late landlady lied all the time. And cheated. And ripped off everybody who lived in her building, the Bright House Apartments.

And by *late*, I don't mean she wasn't on time. *Late*, in this case, means *dead*. As in *the late Mrs. Appleyard*. Because I'm sure she's dead. Well, pretty sure.

When she was still alive, and when something would break in our apartment, Mom or Dad would send me across the street to tell Mrs. Appleyard. Across the street was a tavern called Hank's Bar. Mrs. Appleyard spent half her time in one of Hank's booths, staining the ceiling above her with against-the-rules cigarette smoke. I hated going over there, because I could never escape without a five-minute conversation. It would usually go something like this:

“Mrs. Appleyard, my mom wants me to tell you there’s no water coming out of the shower.”

“She does, does she? Then why doesn’t she come over herself? Doesn’t it seem strange to you that your mother—if she is your mother—sends a child to a tavern?”

“Yeah, well, the shower stopped working and she’s got a head full of shampoo and no clothes on.”

“What’s her name, again? This woman you call your mother?” Mrs. Appleyard took a swallow from her glass of red, fizzy liquid.

“Umm—Kathleen.”

“Kathleen. So she’s Irish. And she doesn’t want to come to the bar? But your last name is Silver. Isn’t that Jewish?”

“I think English and some other stuff. I don’t really know.”

“You don’t know? But you do know this Irish woman is your mother?”

“Yes, and I’m supposed to tell you—“

“The shower. I know. How do you know she’s your real mother?”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“Mr. Appleyard thought he knew his real parents, too. He eventually found out he was no relation. They bought him off a boat, if you can believe it, down at the docks. His parents took him home in a Styrofoam cooler, same way you’d take home a catch of Dungeness crab. Then they lied to him about it.” She took another swallow of her red fizzy liquid. “It’s been my experience, and continues to be my experience, that all people are liars. I know I’m one. In fact,

I'm going to lie right now." She smiled. "Tell your supposed mother I'll be right over."

That's a tiny sample—a little sip—of Mrs. Appleyard. I wished I could have found a way to avoid hearing her stories. But I didn't have a choice. My parents made me their message boy.

But you, Dear Reader, you have a choice. You can set this book down right now and go read a car magazine instead. You can go outside and run a race down the block against your best friend. You probably won't believe me, anyway. But this story is true. At least one little devil appears. At least one bone breaks. At least one person dies—maybe more. And the hot tub that comes out of nowhere—well, I'm just saying that it all happened. This is as close to the facts as I can stand to get.

Maybe you shouldn't believe. Maybe you'll sleep better if you don't. And maybe you should remember what Mrs. Appleyard said, about all people being liars.

2

I INTRODUCE YOU TO THE TENANTS, THE FRIEND, AND THE SOON-TO-BE-DEAD MAN

MY NAME IS GABE. But that's enough about me. And you've already met Mrs. Appleyard.

Next is a girl named Joanna. She causes all sorts of problems. She's in seventh grade, like me. I have permanent bruises on both arms because of her.

Henry's my best friend. Some people think we're related, like brothers or cousins, because they hardly ever see one of us without the other. I guess I could hang out with other people, but—I don't know—the truth is I'd rather just hang out with Henry, even if he drives me crazy sometimes. By the way, he used to be the catcher on our baseball team, before he broke his arm, but that comes later.

Mr. Shoreby is a really rich guy. Don't get too attached to him. He'll be dead soon.

Then there's Doctor Mandrake, who lives on the top floor of my building. He's the one who's gonna tell me not to lose my soul.

Turns out it's harder than it sounds.

Most of this story happened at the Bright House Apartments. The Bright House sat across the street from Hank's Bar, in Tacoma, Washington. Next to the bar was the Corner Store, where Mr. Kim sold beef jerky, expired candy, and car magazines wrapped in plastic. Don't worry about Mr. Kim. He doesn't come into play. In fact, let's not mention him at all after this. Let's get to what actually happens. The details.

Just remember, Dear Reader, the Devil is in the details.

Dad claimed the Bright House was white. That's what he said when he first gave Mom directions, before we moved in. "It's the big white building, right across from the store," said Dad. His voice was coming out of the speaker on Mom's phone.

"Across from the bar, you mean?" asked Mom. My little sisters and I were staring out the window of Mom's pool-cleaning van. "There is no white building. There's a brick building, but the sign on that says Gregor Manor. And next to that is an old gray thing."

"That's the one."

"Oh, Johann. You've got to be kidding me. You want us to live there?"

"I already signed the lease."

"You signed it? For how long?"

"One year."

"Johann, you can't be serious. The building looks like it's about to fall apart."

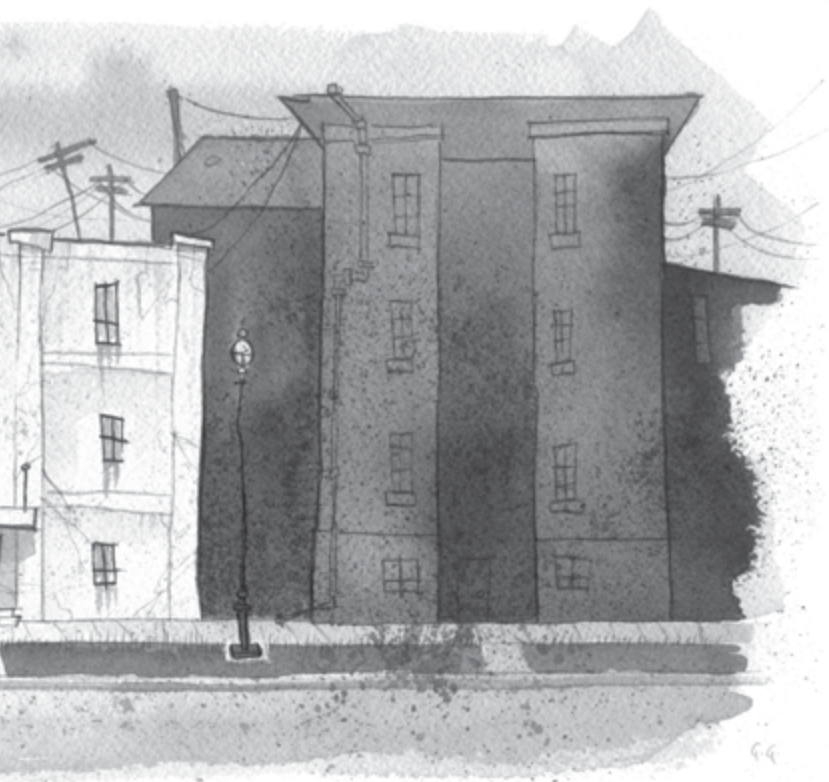
The Bright House Apartments building was shaped like a cube. I say *was*, Dear Reader, because it's not there anymore. When it was still standing, it was three stories tall



and had eight units. Actually, more like seven and one-quarter. On the first floor was Mrs. Hashimoto, a painter—she painted art, not houses. The floor outside her door was speckled with bits of red, blue, and black paint. I would not meet her for another two weeks.

Right next to her lived a man named Jimmy Hyde, who I soon learned seemed to do nothing except sit behind his locked door and play Hawaiian music. Which was fine by me. On the rare occasions when he did come out, he looked about a hundred years old, with a few wisps of white hair on his head, a face full of wrinkles, and a few brown teeth in his mouth.

Mrs. Appleyard lived in one big unit that took up one



whole side of the first floor. I don't know why she needed all that space, since she spent nearly all her time in Hank's Bar.

The quarter unit belonged to Alejandro Aguilar, the fix-it man. His tiny apartment was jammed under the stairs on the first floor.

"Alley Handro can help you with your heavy stuff," said Mrs. Appleyard on the first of May, the day we moved in. *Alley Handro*. That's how she said his name, all hard letters. Mrs. Appleyard had a glass of that red fizzy stuff in her hand. She drank it through a straw.

"He can help?" said Dad. "That would be great. See what a nice place this is, honey? They even help you move in."

Mom hefted a box without a word.

Our unit was on the second floor, along with two other families. In the small apartment next door lived “the weird girl with the sick mom,” in the words of my sisters. Right across the hall from us was a family named Brackley. They were gone the day we moved in. “On some fancy vacation,” said Mrs. Appleyard. “Fanciest folks in the building.”

“See, honey?” said Dad, as he and Alejandro tried to angle our old, worn couch through our front door. “We’re right across the hall from the best folks in the building.”

Mrs. Appleyard sucked on her straw. “I didn’t say the best. I said the fanciest.”

“How many people live upstairs?” said Mom, glaring at the glass in the landlady’s hand.

“Just the one,” said Mrs. Appleyard. “Doc Mandrake.”

“A doctor?” said Dad. “Honey, we’ve got a doctor living upstairs from us.”

“He ain’t a real doctor,” said Mrs. Appleyard. “Can’t help you with as much as an infected toenail. He’s some sort of astro—what do you call it—he studies stars and planets and all that.”

“An astronomer? A man of science?”

“Something like that.”

“I’d rather have a real doctor,” said Mom.

“You and me both,” said Mrs. Appleyard, taking another suck on the straw. “Bunch of hocus-pocus if you ask me. Mr. Appleyard never did cotton to any of that moon-in-the-seventh-house-Age-of-Aquarius-hippy-dippy nonsense.” She kept talking while Mom dropped her box in the hallway and went downstairs for another.

Alejandro and Dad muscled our old couch through our door and dropped it with a thud. Alejandro Aguilar was a white-haired man with light brown skin. When he finally finished jamming the last piece of furniture inside our apartment, he handed Dad a piece of yellow paper.

“What’s this?” said Dad.

“This is a bill from Mrs. Appleyard.”

“A bill? Two hundred dollars? But I already paid the rent.”

“Not for rent,” said Alejandro. “This bill is for moving fees.”

Dad took the bill down to Mrs. Appleyard’s apartment to complain, but she wasn’t there. Alejandro pointed to the bar across the street. Dad marched the bill to Hank’s. When he came back ten minutes later, I asked him what happened.

“Don’t mention this to your mother,” he said.

Our apartment was listed as a three-bedroom. That was a stretch. My parents had the biggest room, which was smaller than my bedroom in our old house. My sisters’ bunk beds nearly filled their shared room. Their dresser touched the bed on one side and the wall on the other. Dad called it cozy. The only window in their room was cut in half by a wall.

My room was even skinnier, but longer. It was slightly less wide than a mattress, so we ditched my bedframe and just laid the mattress on the floor. Both sides curled up against the walls. The other half of the window from my sisters’ room was at the end, just above my pillow.

“Johann, this isn’t a bedroom. It’s barely even a hallway. Gabriel can’t sleep here. His bed is like a trough.”

“Cozy,” said Dad. “Just think of it as cozy.”

The living room and kitchen weren’t too bad. No dining room. No entryway. But the weirdest features in the apartment were the white, circular fixtures on every wall. There were eight of them in the living room, eight in the kitchen, and four in each bedroom. Each one had a tiny red light that blinked every second.

“What are those things?” said Mom. “They look like smoke detectors.”

“They *are* smoke detectors,” said Dad. “Same kind as the one we had in our old house. I guess they really care about safety. That’s good. Isn’t that good, honey?”

“It’s weird. It creeps me out.”

Dear Reader, I would hear those smoke detectors go off one day. I would hear them all sing together, like some sort of screeching, electronic choir.

More smoke detectors lined the hallway, the stairs, and everywhere else throughout the building. When I said they creeped me out, too, Dad said, “Keep your thoughts to yourself, Gabe, because this place is all we can afford. Heck, we can’t really even afford this, unless I get a better job somehow, somewhere.”

“I don’t see how you can’t find a job,” I said. “You’ve got so many degrees. I mean, *you’re* a doctor, too.”

“Doctors of sociology don’t get jobs as easily as doctors of medicine,” Dad said.

The university had fired Dad. Whenever I said that—that he was fired—Dad got all cranky. “I wasn’t fired. They had to do some right-sizing. Someone had to go. It just happened to be me.”

“Sounds like you *just happened* to get fired,” I said.

Right now, Dad was teaching part-time at the community college during the day and delivering pizzas for Hasty’s Pizza at night. His car smelled like pizza all the time.

Mom was a writer who didn’t seem to make any money from the travel books she wrote. I wouldn’t recommend buying one. I mean, she’s never really done any traveling, except driving from pool to pool around Tacoma. She cleaned swimming pools and hot tubs while we were at school. Her van smelled like chlorine.

Both my parents’ cars smelled like lousy jobs.

But Mom still wrote books about climbing Kilimanjaro, walking the Great Wall of China, and bicycling through Holland. As far as I knew, she’d never been to any of those places. If she’d gone, she sure hadn’t taken me with her.

When Dad finished assembling our beds, he said he needed to go to work at Hasty’s. “You’re leaving now?” asked Mom. “We haven’t even gotten the furniture situated.”

“Gabriel can help you,” said Dad. “He’s practically a man now.”

“Thirteen is not a man,” said Mom.

Dad squeezed my arm, as if checking a peach to see if it was ripe. He shrugged, then left. For the next two hours, Mom ordered my sisters and me around until we got the living room in some kind of shape.

My sisters, Meg and Georgina, were nine-year-old twins. Georgina cut her own hair with scissors, “because the salon people never make it short enough.” Georgina took after Mom. She wore hiking boots and helped Mom change the oil on both our cars. Meg was more interested

in changing her nail polish, which she did precisely every three days.

When Mom finally let us go, I went into my bedroom to start decorating it.

Last night I'd slept in my room in our old house. It wasn't like the old house was anything special, but we'd had a backyard with a trampoline. Just the closet in my old room was almost as big as this whole room.

All day, Dad had kept telling me I should be grateful I had a roof over my head. I'd said, "It's not a roof. It's a floor. I have Doctor Mandrake's floor over my head."

I shoved my mattress up against the half window and put my dresser on the other end of the narrow room. There was no space next to my bed for my nightstand, so I put that at the foot end of my mattress.

I hung my car posters on the walls, starting at the far end with the orange McLaren F-1. Then came the 1961 blue Jaguar E-Type—the one that some people call the XK-E. After that was the yellow Lamborghini Miura. I'm not much of a Lamborghini fan, but Henry got me that poster for my last birthday, so I kind of had to hang it up. Then came the 1955 silver Mercedes-Benz 300SL, the 2004 Porsche Carrera GT, and the black AC Cobra with the two white stripes right up the middle.

The Cobra had been my favorite for years, because it was just so mean looking. That was until I saw the Ferrari 430. Four-thirty as in 430 horsepower. Top speed of 196 miles an hour.

Dear Reader, by now you probably get that I like cars. They go fast. They can take you anywhere. They look

cool—at least the nice ones. Freedom, power, and coolness, just rolling down the road. So I like them. Maybe even love them. But I've never been in a position to do anything more than dream, because my mom and dad—like most grown-ups—seem to secretly hate cars. Or they hate the fact that they can't afford the good ones. Or maybe Mom and Dad hate cars because they're reminders that they don't have any freedom, don't have any power, and aren't cool.

The Ferrari 430 was the car in the poster closest to the head of my bed. Painted in Ferrari red, of course. Its body was so smooth and flowing it looked as much like a sea creature as it did a car. I would have given my right arm just to see one. I would have given both arms to own one.

Turned out, I'd get to keep my arms. I'd only have to give my soul.