

# Cavity

by Tove Himango

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Ryan pulling his arm back in through the car window. He sounds more than a little reproachful when he glances over at me. "This is the neighborhood?"

"Watch yourself," I say, except I really couldn't care less. I'm busy keeping an eye on house numbers. "I used to live here, you know."

He makes some humming noise. "Has it changed?"

I have to think about that for a second. I *did* live in this neighborhood, but not for long. My parents moved us out when I was six and we only came back once. I don't even remember what the place looked like, hence the careful attention to the house numbers now.

It's quiet. We drive past an old man slowly walking a shuffling black lab, but it's Monday at lunch time, and something under 20 degrees. Nobody else is out. There used to be lots of kids, I remember that, but I can't recall driving past any deflated basketballs in the streets, or seeing a single toppled-over tricycle in anyone's front yard. There's still trash in the gutters and potholes that will probably never be filled. Visually, it has an older feeling to it—20 years older, I suppose—but otherwise it seems pretty much the same.

As I shrug, my eyes catch on a house number peeking through the branches of a juniper tree, white text on red wood, situated at the corner of Georgina Avenue and Pear Street. "Not really," I finally reply, and pull up to the curb.

Ryan leans over me to look out my window, shielding his eyes from the sun. "666?"

"I told you."

"I know, but I still think it's funny. And not very inviting."

"Nobody cares about stuff like that," I say, getting out of the dented old van while Ryan does the same. "The only reason anyone's renting a one-bedroom Airbnb is because they want to check out the city and they don't like hotels. They'll be away from it as much as possible."

Ryan walks over to me, crossing his big arms over his chest. "Especially this one."

I look up at the house, and I see what he means. It's essentially an old white square, almost a colonial save for one out-of-place turret. The paint is peeling, the porch railing is busted and I haven't had a chance to call someone to fix either thing. The front yard's a little torn up and dull, but I choose to blame that on the nature of early winter. It isn't awful to look at, really, but it's probably the worst I've hosted since I started three or four years ago—except for my old place, which was a mess at the time. It also attracted some weird guests. Since then, I've elected to buy places to rent out, comfortably away from my own home.

And Ryan's right—the location *is* terrible. Even as a kid I knew something weird was going on at the dilapidated park on the edge of the neighborhood, with guys meeting up for quick exchanges and leaving in separate cars. Neighbors had break-ins and we'd wonder when it would happen to us. Sometime before I was born, a woman may or may not have been stabbed by a jealous ex and left to bleed out in the street one block down. Or maybe my mom just told me that to scare me.

Ryan probably doesn't know all that—I didn't tell him, at least—but he hasn't been with me in the hosting business long and still has a thing or two to learn about the Airbnb culture. What matters and doesn't matter.

"It's right outside the city," I remind Ryan in a matter-of-fact voice, and begin counting the things on my fingers. "It's the first block off the highway, it's central to all the touristy shit, and because it sucks here, people know I'm not gonna charge them that much." I finish counting, putting my fingers away with a flourish. He doesn't look impressed but doesn't say anything else, either.

"Now come on," I say, hooking my fingers in the heavy black handles on the van's back doors. "Let's move some stuff in."

He hauls a dark blue rug over his shoulder and carries a lamp in his other hand. I set my heavy cardboard box down on the doorstep to fish out the keys, wishing I had left it for Ryan to grab, because it's full of dishes and silverware. The door opens with a creak.

It's not bad inside, just old and a little dusty. The age even affords it some nice woodwork and a stained-glass window at the top of the stairs that'll look real pretty once it gets wiped down a few times. I still don't remember anything about the house from when I was a kid, so it might as well be like I never lived here at all. "Just drop that stuff in the living room for now," I instruct, nodding down the empty hallway. I had some larger pieces of furniture brought in a week or so ago, but it was still pretty bare bones. This is my first time being in the house—since I was six, I mean. Even when we stopped by a year after moving out, only my dad went inside, and wouldn't let my mom and I follow, the weird guy he was—but the layout matches the pictures, and I planned precisely for the space.

After we move the things in, I give Ryan a tour, stepping around boxes and familiarizing myself with the place at the same time.

"This is the kitchen... I had this stove fixed up but I think I'll keep the countertops for now, for a vintage look... Well, okay, because I don't want to pay for it unless someone complains. And the ceiling's a little low and the tiles are heinous, but what can you do?" I say, pointing in every direction while Ryan pretends his eyes aren't glazing over. "Come upstairs, I'll show you the bedroom. I'm hoping the carpet isn't as bad as it looked in the pictures."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, but you'll probably need to get it cleaned... How long has the place been on the market, again?" Ryan asks from behind me as we ascend the stairs. I note how creaky they are and close my eyes, just for a second, as if the sound will bring me back to age six. I hardly hear him.

"Twelve," I say, and open my eyes.

Ryan murmurs something that I can't pick up, then loudly says, "Gross, what's this mattress in the hallway? Tell me you put that there." I step over the mattress that leans against the hallway wall and round the corner into the master bedroom—the other bedroom, the one I slept in, is so small that I'm converting it into a study. Standing in the doorway, I get this feeling like I'm not supposed to be in here. Probably just remnants of being little, when mom-and-dad's room was a "no kids zone" and I guess I can remember that, now. The room is L-shaped with one window, a closet, and some predictably ugly green carpet.

"Are you going to go in?" Ryan presses, and I spring inside, even though it still feels strange to do. I must be too quiet, poking around the corners of the room like a kid in a candy store and examining the light fixtures, because he keeps going. "The carpet's not bad."

I narrow my eyes. "It's absurd how poor your eye is for this stuff."

Ryan smiles, and he honestly shouldn't be so amused because I'm not joking. "And it's absurd how bad you are with people. That's why you work on the rentals and I work with the renters, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah," I say, and turn around to see him opening the closet door. "Don't do that—"

The door creaks open, but he pauses to give me a look. "Any reason why, or..?"

"No. I think I feel weird about it because it was my mom's, actually," I admit, as if we're close and I should feel compelled to start talking about how surreal it is to be in a room that belonged to my late parents in a house I can't even remember.

"I think it's weird that you bought the house in the first place," Ryan replies, and flicks on the light in the closet. It's a walk-in, with a slanted ceiling and white, built-in shelves. Empty except for a broken air conditioning unit on the green floor.

"You already said that."

"Yeah, I did, when you told me it used to be your parents' *after* you bought it. And I still think it's weird. I thought you didn't have any attachment to the place?"

"I don't. If I did, I wouldn't be fixing it up and renting it out," I explain, poking around the shelves before tipping my head back at him, wavy hair falling in my eyes. "It probably won't even look completely like this when I'm done with it. Would somebody with an attachment to their first childhood home do that? I don't think so."

"There's your first project," Ryan says, ignoring me. "Where does that lead?"

I turn around and see, for the first time, another door, like the closet has its own closet at the top of a small flight of stairs—this one, however, is boarded shut. I stare at it for a moment before remembering something. "I think it's the turret. It's not a real room, the floor isn't meant to support weight. It's just for show... at least, that's what my mom would say."

I don't look over at Ryan, but I hear him behind me: "I thought you didn't remember anything."

I just shrug, because I didn't either. "It's too big of a project to try to fix up. We'll just put a sign up... Do not enter, you'll fall through the floor, something like that."

I do look at Ryan this time, and he shrugs back. "If you say so. Let's get out of this closet, though. It's freezing."

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I'm lost in thought, eyes scanning my laptop screen when Ryan appears in front of me. "Ozzy," he greets, and I nearly knock my coffee over. "What's up?"

"Sit down," I reply, and readjust my reading glasses before gesturing to the other booth seat across the table from me.

"Are you going to tell me why, or..."

"Just sit down, then I will."

He relents, sliding into the seat and tipping his head forward expectantly. I'm playing with the paper ring around my to-go cup, and I can feel his tired eyes looking at the cup, then

back to me and my laptop. Then he starts doing his own fidgeting, leaning forward on one elbow while he buries his hand in his short locs. I glance up at him, "You seem anxious. Maybe you should get decaf."

"I'm not ordering anything," he exclaims. "Why'd you call me? It's Saturday, I don't want to think about work."

"How do you know it's about work?" I protest.

He gives me a pointed look. "Because you don't call about anything else."

That's definitely true. We went from high school "boyfriend-and-girlfriend" (this was back before he realized he was a guy) to sort-of friends in college to almost-strangers when he went off to grad school and I started doing this. We started talking again around a year ago when he was working in "freelance communications," whatever that means, and he joined me as a Co-Host sometime later. All I know is that he deals with most of the guests and fights with Airbnb when they try to screw us over, and that's what I need him for.

"Whatever," I say, and flip the laptop around to show him the screen, leaning over the table so I can keep looking at it, too. "Did you see this comment about the Georgina place?"

He squints at the screen, then nods. "Yeah, I saw it. They gave us five stars."

"Not what I'm talking about," I say, and tap the screen with my finger, right on the review. "*Ozzy and Ryan are great hosts with a lovely home. The house is centrally located, and certainly haunted. Ozzy and Ryan are a lovely couple.*"

"They think we're gay," Ryan comments.

"Also not what I'm talking about—they said the place is haunted. Isn't that a little interesting to you?"

"It's probably just because of the house number."

"You might think that, but look at this comment from last week..." I say, and scroll down to another review so rapidly that the screen shakes. It's been a few months since we started renting out the old white house, and it's gotten a surprising amount of traffic. "*Comfortable and private, but I was not the only guest in the house. Ideal location for a séance. What is that?*"

"I told you about that one, remember? The lady messaged me about hearing weird creaks and groans, feeling cold spots, et cetera."

"I assumed she was complaining!" I exclaim, pulling my laptop back towards me. "That doesn't seem like it should be a perk!"

"Well that's good, isn't it? Less work for us."

"Exactly, you get it."

He pauses. "What do I get?"

"We're gonna start listing it as a haunted house," I say, finally taking a sip of my now-cold coffee.

"I was joking," he says, deadpan. "We should fix those things."

"Hear me out," I begin, and he leans back in his seat. "Half of our reviews are like this. Just for this place, not any of the others."

"So you agree. You think it's haunted?" he presses.

"No, I think *they* think it's haunted, and the power of suggestion works. Besides, marketing it as a creepy, broken-down place means we don't have to fix anything about it being creepy *or* broken-down." I look over the reviews one more time and close the laptop. "I think

this could be a big money-maker. Isn't Evanesence touring at the auditorium downtown soon? I bet some of those fans will want to stay somewhere with demons, or whatever."

Ryan is quiet for a moment, seemingly weighing the pros and cons in his head—it might be a good idea, but then he'd have to admit to agreeing with me. He sighs, "The séance lady did say she would suggest the place to her *ghost-hunting friends*..."

I grin. "Let me buy you a coffee. Something decaf."

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It's been five months since opening, and I think the place finally looks perfect. Well, *almost* perfect, but that's why we're here today.

I had rugs *imported* for the hallways and study—from North Carolina, sure, but I'm not made of money and these things matter to me. I've basically ridden out every decent antique store within city limits, even the weird one with broken mannequins in the window, to fill the rooms with classy, mildly spooky shit for the ghost-hunting crowd. Ryan agrees, it's a nice look for the place (although not what I was imagining for it one bit) and I don't mind bending over backwards for a well-paying crowd, no matter how stupid I may personally find their interests. The only time I have a problem with it is when they mess up my perfectly lovely spaces with shit like salt and candle wax.

Ryan steps over a pile of the stuff beside me. "Jeez, this place is a mess."

"And to think," I huff, and gesture to him. "I bought these people a Ouija board."

He looks down at the large box in his arms. "*That's* what you're making me carry?"

"Yup. Brand new, made by Hasbro. Shelved right next to Chutes and Ladders."

"Figures," he grumbles. "But why do I have to carry it?"

I'll have to clean later, since Ryan and I have work to do—but *god*, even the window has got some weird wet stuff on it, like they tossed holy water on the pane. It was a creepy window, sure—little stained-glass rabbits and deer in a forest full of these white trees with what looked vaguely like eyes on the trunks—but what good-for-nothing ghost is gonna haunt a window?

I turn to Ryan, and grin, wagging the contents of my own hands in his direction: two crowbars, one each. "Because I needed both hands for these."

He follows me upstairs, past the window and the upstairs bathroom, over some dirty sheets strewn across the floor (seriously, our last guests were *animals*), through the sharply-curved hallway and into the bedroom. The mess doesn't even let me appreciate the pretty wood flooring I had installed, and that would be the last straw in me preventing myself from hovering over Ryan's shoulder and telling him exactly what I think he should message those guests if I wasn't so eager to get into that little room.

"Bring the box into the closet," I instruct, pushing open the heavy door to the walk-in and turning on the lights.

"Are you planning on turning it into a Ouija room?" he asks, but obliges, dropping it down in a corner before joining me where I stand, in front of the boarded-up door at the top of the short flight of stairs.

"Maybe. It's small and unfinished, we could turn it into any weird little ghost thing. But that isn't why I wanted the box. I put a flashlight in it, I don't think there are any windows." I pick at the boards a bit, and my mind is sailing with possibilities for the space. Once we secure the flooring and add insulation, we could really do anything—we had the money, at this point,

and the Georgina house was proving to be the money-maker I thought it could be. With a weird crowd, sure, but there's no money to be made with judgment.

Ryan eyes the door up and down, rubbing his arms with his hands to warm up—we're both still in thick winter coats, the way the heating in the house has still been inconsistent. "You seem completely in your element. Remind me why you need my help with this?"

"Because you're a gym rat and this might require heavy lifting," I say, and he doesn't deny it. "Also, we need to talk money. How much more could we charge with the extra space?"

"You mean what would people be willing to pay?" He looks at the boarded-up door again. "For an extra tiny room in the closet?"

"Sure. Hey, don't forget the Ouija board. Maybe I could get some of the stuff people keep messaging you about, the spirit radio box or teddy bear thing, I don't know," I say, and think for a moment. "If I was all into ghosts like that, I'd really commit. I'd want to stay at a place with equipment like that. I'd make a point out of only staying in places where people died."

I stick a crowbar in a slot between two boards. "Hell, maybe I'd kill someone. If death and the afterlife is truly your passion, why wouldn't you try to make a ghost yourself? I feel like there'd be no other way to do it, you know? Damn, these things are really nailed down."

When I look back at Ryan his brown eyes seem tired again, even though it's only six in the evening. "Totally normal thought to have," he says.

"Shut up, okay? Just help me get this open."

He picks up a crowbar and joins me in prying off the wooden boards. A lot of the nails are sticking out at weird angles, like it was a rushed job. I had decided to leave it so ugly because I thought it looked creepy.

"I'm not trying to burst your bubble," Ryan begins, and grunts when he manages to pry away one side of a board, immediately working on the other. "But you know we might not be able to fix it, right? It wouldn't make sense structurally, or it would take way more time to clean than it's worth. There's a decent chance raccoons have just been crawling in there to die."

"Sure," I shrug, tossing a board away. Of course it's possible. The house is over a hundred years old, there's a lot that could be wrong with it. "But I have a good feeling about this."

In an instant, Ryan gets this look on his face like a cat dropped a dead mouse at his feet. "Ugh, what's wrong with those ones? Is that mold?"

I follow his gaze back to the door, and sure enough, beneath the relatively-new boards we've just removed are more boards—these ones are darker, with green and black spots that I'm not confident aren't patches of mold. It's worse around the edges, like a spongy buffer. "They're a lot older, I think," I realize, leaning close to them with curiosity. They almost look *wet*.

"Don't get too close, Ozzy," Ryan admonishes, pulling me back by the puffy hood of my jacket. "You probably shouldn't breathe that in. God, people have just been sleeping in the same room as this, huh?"

"I guess it's good we're doing this now," I say, and step back, before jamming a crowbar under one of those boards. "Come on, let's keep going."

The older boards come off a lot easier than the first ones. They break with dull sounds, like each was only really dry and splintering in the very center. The nails are brittle, but most just

tear through the wood, anyway. I'm picking away at the last pieces of wood still covering the door frame, which was probably once white and has since been stained a dull grayish-brown in multiple places, when Ryan coughs behind me.

"Did you bring any masks?" he asks, and I see him holding his fist up to his mouth.

"Yeah, in the box. In case it seemed safe to go in," I say, backing up from the door a bit. I can see the problem—it stinks like mildew, strong and permeating.

He steps back over while I get a better look at the door, overall regular save for the discoloration. The knob is chipped glass, cut in the shape of a crystal with a pin hole in the middle. I'm vaguely wishing I hadn't left my gloves downstairs when I reach for the doorknob, but I don't have my hand on it for long after I realize it won't turn. "Pin hole," I say, wiping my hand off on my coat. "Of course it's locked."

"They didn't give you the key when you bought the place?" Ryan asks, a blue medical mask fixed over his nose.

I stare at the door, and pick up my crowbar. "Not this one."

"What are you doing?" Ryan asks as I shove the head of the crowbar into the doorframe, an action quickly followed by a splintering noise. "Jesus, you're going to wreck the whole thing."

"We can replace it. It's covered in mold, anyway. Help me?"

We pry away at the door, the area around the knob taking the longest. I find myself breathing hard, and realize I'm actually having to exert myself a lot. I'm not opposed to that, really, I just take my coat off to combat the sweat. My unrelenting sense of determination to get through this door is surprising even to me. It's because of the future profit, sure, and the excitement I'll admit to having over getting to plan out a very unique renovation project. It's not because of this feeling I keep getting, that maybe I did remember this room, in this house I used to live in—that my mom would pull me away from her closet and chide me, saying it wasn't safe. It's not because I just realized the doorknob is the same as the one on the door to my old room, too small to even be a proper study.

It's Ryan who gets through the last little knot in the wood, and he strains so hard the door flies open when it breaks, sending him backward a few steps.

And I just look in.

"Oh." I say, and close my mouth. I open it again, then close it, like a fish gasping for air. I don't know what to say.

Predictably, dust billows out of the entrance, probably compounded animal shit and asbestos, illuminated by the light from the ceiling lamp. I notice, however, that the light does not penetrate the darkness of the room in front of me. It's black, darker than black, like a solid, featureless surface.

I find myself looking behind me, suddenly, and feeling a rush of relief that Ryan's still there. "Hand me a flashlight," I ask, nodding at the box like I don't suddenly feel unbearably uncomfortable in my own body.

Instead, Ryan pulls a flashlight out of the box and immediately shines it in the doorway himself. His already-big eyes go wide, and I follow his gaze, expecting to see—I don't know. A raccoon? A ghost?

But there's nothing.

It feels like something big is caught in my throat. The spot the light should illuminate is still all black, like the darkness caught the beam and destroyed it in an instant.

"What—what the hell?" Ryan says, hesitant. "It's painted over. Did they brick it up?"

I sigh, tension leaving my shoulders. It's solid black. It's solid. I get closer.

Ryan is still muttering behind me. "But why leave the door..?"

I just need to make sure. Reaching forward, I think, *I just need to see something—*

"...Why nail up the boards?"

My hand passes through so quickly I almost trip forward, the blackness swallowing my arm like a wet mouth. The sick chill that spreads through my body, fingers first, is instantaneous and devastating, even before something large and wet folds around my elbow. I make some strangled noise as I yank my arm back out, stumbling back and holding it like I've been shocked.

*Wet. Wet, wet, wet.*

And something else.

"What? Oz—" Ryan starts, and I fall on my ass, overcome with the kind of pain I only get in my skull when I'm on the verge of an anxiety attack. Ryan leans down in front of me, but keeps whipping his head back to the room, incredulous. "Ozzy, are you okay?"

My face is blanched. "It's kind of warm in there."

"It's warm. So what, it's warm? Who gives a fuck?" Ryan grabs my arm, turning it over, but I can hardly feel it, much less find the nerve to look at it. "The temperature in the whole house is weird, what are you—"

I yank out of his grasp and fall towards the box with the stupid Ouija board in it, pulling out the other flashlight. It's bigger, stronger, I think, and I think it's brighter, I flick it on—

Ryan gasps, but my mouth is set in a tight line, like the situation is just a little unfortunate and not the strangest fucking thing that's ever had me on the verge of pissing myself. The wide circle of white light stops in the black air of the doorway like it hit a wall. Something about it is irredeemably repulsive, and I realize I can see one thing in the light, peeling out of the darkness—clouds of steam, like breath in cold weather.

Warm hadn't been the right word. The darkness is hot and humid, almost like a sauna, but not quite. Wetness coats my arm, slicking the hair down to my tingling skin.

"Do you hear that?" Ryan asks, barely audible.

"I don't hear anything," I reply. The room is so quiet, as if even the old pipes stopped creaking out of reverence. Like sound has been sucked out of the room, into that one.

*Oh.* Now I hear it.

Breathing. Thick, almost smothered, like a dog panting while suffering a swollen tongue. It doesn't belong to anything as small as a dog, though, no, the room would have to be full of dogs panting in unison to fill the scope that it does. It surrounds the entirety of the doorway, the room itself. So does a smell.

"*Up.*" Ryan hisses behind me, a voice so lovely and refreshingly human. He has to lean forward, grip my shoulder before I oblige and manage to get to my feet.

I fly out the closet door after Ryan like we've both grown wings. I think I fall down a few of the stairs, or maybe he does, and I don't think about my coat upstairs. I don't even think about my arm, the sticky, stinging feeling it was starting to have.

I don't look back.



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I end up face down in the snow. The first thing I see is my arm, flaring red and angry, like it had been doused in boiling water, or some kind of venom. Then I see Ryan, the lucky bastard, still surrounded with navy blue wool and staring at the house. Then I see my childhood home, and I think somewhat absently that I'll never go in there again. It's like I'm in the car with my mom, seven years old. I'm staring through the back window as my dad rushes out of the red front doors, three identical numbers hanging over his head, with a look on his face that I had never seen before, and never saw again.