

Connaught Riley

Monsters and Tea

March 18, 1976

Flo was scared. It was her first night by herself in the apartment, yet she could feel that she wasn't alone. She had just purchased the 1946 building in an attempt to start her own life. The previous owner had mentioned something about its troubled past, and Flo had told her sister about her worries. Sophie had laughed at her, saying Flo had always seen things that weren't there, that she needed to grow up.

"Maybe it's another creature!" Sophie had taunted, twisting away from Flo's chastising swat.

"I'm serious this time Sophie, I feel like there's something else here." Flo knew she was right. There was something strange going on.

"Just like how you felt there was something that night in the theatre?" Sophie raised an eyebrow at her.

"Shut up. I told you I saw something."

"Yeah, a mouse."

Now, Florence lied in her bed staring at the chipping ceiling above her, too afraid to close her eyes.

Rustle Rustle

She stopped breathing. She laid there, silent as the grave, waiting for another noise.

Rustle Rustle

She jumped out of bed and leaped across the floor to the light switch. When she flicked the overhead on, the room was empty. Nothing skittered between the furniture or hid under the bed. She let out a nervous sigh.

Something is in this house.

January 5, 2021

Flo had spent a long time alone. For the past few years, she had been the sole (human) inhabitant of her small apartment building 4 blocks south of H Street. Although she was alone, she was never lonely. She had her friends in the walls, a statement that deeply concerned her remaining family members.

Now things were changing. She had a new tenant moving in. A woman, young, from the sound of her voice on the telephone. That's a good sign. She was driving down from Boston and had apparently never been to DC. Flo was hopeful that she would be different. It had been so long since someone else had been able to stay.

The sound of a car door slamming startled Flo to attention. She shuffled her way over to the window to see a young woman, no older than 25, stepping out of a bright red car. She looked short, her head barely coming over the top of the vehicle, and she had a pained expression on her face as she turned toward the building.

Looking up at the apartment Aniyah felt a kind of dread, deep in her stomach. The building was old and worn, as made evident by white paint peeling away to reveal chipped brick beneath. Online, the apartments had seemed rustic and spacious. Aniyah hoped the interior resembled its online profile better than the exterior.

The apartment had been listed for a mysteriously low price for DC, almost half of what other places in the neighborhood charged. Her parents had warned her to be cautious, worrying over the lack of existing reviews. They were just being dramatic, trying to prevent her from leaving. Besides, she didn't need a nice apartment, she just needed an apartment. Preferably far from Boston, preferably in a city, and preferably cheap. This building was all of those things, and it would provide her a much-needed fresh start.

She knocked on the front door and was greeted, almost immediately, by an ancient woman in a quilted floral frock. She had massive green eyes huddled in a face of wrinkles. They seemed out of place on her face, too clear, too young for this haggard woman.

"You must be Ana?" She asked, extending a plump hand.

"It's Aniyah, actually. And you must be Ms. Durham, the landlord?" Aniyah took the woman's hand. Florence had a surprisingly strong grip.

"My friends call me Flo." Florence stepped aside allowing Aniyah to enter the building.

Immediately, Aniyah was hit with the overwhelming smell of must, dust, and a peculiar metallic undertone. Otherwise, the entryway looked nice enough. There was a small table with a crocheted dolly and vase of flowers. They seemed to droop around the edges, the petals starting to rot and gave off a faint too-sweet smell when Aniyah moved closer.

"Aren't they beautiful?" Flo had noticed her gaze "My niece owns a flower shop and brings them for me once and a while, they just seem to make them so happy."

Them?

"Come this way." Flo directed her towards the rickety steps leading down to a lone door, "As you know, you have the basement apartment. It hasn't been rented in quite a while, so I

apologize for the dust. Here let me get you a key.” She patted at her faded clothing and retrieved not one, but three separate keys.

Aniyah held out her hand and the old woman placed one into her palm, "This is for the front door." Dropping another, she said, "This is for the mailbox, it's just right outside." Holding up the last to eye level, the woman looked through the key so her massive eyes were staring right at Aniyah. Breaking the eye contact, she said "And this is to your door. The hinges can be a bit finicky but a strong young woman like you shouldn't have a problem." Aniyah wondered if Flo was joking as the last key clanged off the other two as she dropped it into Aniyah's hand. "I would offer to help you move your stuff, but well... I'm not quite the girl I used to be. If you have any questions I'm just right there." She pointed at a white door with a pink frame and a faded pink letter B hung on the front.

Aniyah thanked the woman and moved down the stairs to her new apartment. The hinges were completely rusted. When she tried to open the door, it wouldn't budge, and she had to shove at it three times before it finally burst open. She stumbled through the entryway, almost landing face-first on the wooden floor. From the corner of her eye, she could have sworn she saw something scuttle across the floor.

She whipped on the lights, not taking her eyes off that spot in the corner. She stared, waiting, but nothing moved. Oh god, she thought, please don't let it be mice.

March 17, 1977

Flo celebrated her first anniversary in the apartment the only way she knew how, working on the building. She had told Sophie about the noises she'd heard from the walls and only received a brisk "it's probably mice" from her sister. Flo wanted to believe her, but there had

been more than just the noises. She found windows open in the morning that were closed the night before. She found scratches on the floors and walls.

Flo had always had a “vibrant imagination” as her mother would say. She loved ghost stories and tales of mythical creatures. When she was little, she would make fairy homes in the garden. Sophie would join her sometimes. Flo liked playing alone better, Sophie never believed like she did.

Flo had encountered a magical creature only once before. In high school, her boyfriend at the time decided to play a prank on her by locking her and Sophie in the school theatre overnight. Sophie had spent much of the time crying or yelling or berating Flo, so Flo had gone off to “find and exit” but really, she was just trying to get away from Sophie.

Her wandering had led her back behind the stage and into what seemed to be storage. The once large room was crammed with fantastical clothing, various pieces of furniture, and what looked like sound equipment. As she made her way deeper into the room, the lights overhead started to dim. She held herself, walking cautiously, getting nervous.

Suddenly the door behind her slammed shut and the lights went out.

“Hello?” She called meekly.

No response.

“Is anyone there?”

No response.

Flo felt a faint pressure on her right ankle. Slowly she turned and looked down at the creature. It looked right back at her. It wasn’t fully solid, but it was shaped like a person, a very small person, no taller than a foot with big green eyes. Beyond that she couldn’t explain what it

looked like, the outlines were fuzzy, constantly moving and buzzing. She stared down at the beast, something about it seemed familiar, almost comforting.

In a blink, the creature disappeared fading into the shadows of the room. In its place was a key. The very key needed to unlock the theatre doors.

January 9, 2021

Aniyah spent her first few days cleaning and moving her stuff in. Flo was right, the apartment had acquired quite a bit of dust since the last resident had moved out. The apartment was small. It consisted of a kitchen/living room/dining room, a bedroom, and a bathroom. The walls were painted a faded blue, maybe purple, it was hard to tell in the dim light. The singular overhead light flickered when turned on, threatening to go out.

She hadn't fully thought out the furniture situation as she wasn't the most well endowed when it came to finances. In moving to DC, she had effectively cut off her parents aka the bank of her adolescence. And now there was no going back, she was going to make it on her own. The only person she still talked to was her sister.

Forgoing a bed frame for both the financial and the aesthetic incentives, she spent her nights on a mattress on the wooden floor of her room. One night, while lying awake on her mattress, she swore she heard a shuffling in the wall behind her head. Nothing too loud, just a gentle scuttle. Her body froze. She tried to focus on the noise. It grew louder.

Rustle Rustle

She jumped out of bed, snapped on the lights, and saw nothing, no mice. Not yet, she thought. Tomorrow she would purchase a bedframe. She wanted to put as much space as she could between her and the mice that most certainly inhabited this building.

At Bed, Bath, and Beyond, she also decided to pick up a couple of mouse traps for good measure.

Aniyah stopped hearing the mice crawling in her walls. The bed frame seemed to have worked. Maybe she was imagining it, the mouse traps had yet to catch anything. Although one had been set off with a loud *CLAP* that first night, no mouse had been caught. There was, however, a little blotch of red on the wood if you looked closely.

Aniyah's new problem was the heating system which seemed to have broken mysteriously, encasing her in a basement apartment in 42-degree weather. She had sent Ms. Durham, Flo, a series of progressively angrier texts that she had yet to respond to. It never occurred to Aniyah that Flo's phone wasn't able to receive texts, as it was still mounted on her kitchen wall.

Finally sick of huddling under piles of blankets and wrapping herself in layers upon layers of clothing, Aniyah stomped up the stairs to come face to face with that cheery pink B. After knocking multiple times, Aniyah heard the soft shuffling of old feet on even older floors.

Flo opened the door with a great big smile on her face. "Ana! Come in, come in!" Flo moved to the side and ushered Aniyah in.

"Aniyah." Aniyah corrected. "I came to talk to you about the heating situation in my apartment."

Without answering, Flo turned and made her way into the kitchen where she proceeded to make several clinking and harrumphing sounds. "Feel free to make yourself comfortable, the living room is just down the hall. Do you take milk and sugar in your tea?" she called from the kitchen.

Aniyah made her way deeper into the apartment. The hallway was full of pictures of smiling faces. Each frame featured a smiling Flo and various partners staring at the camera. Following the photos, she moved back in time. They seemed to span decades. The first seemed to be taken recently, Flo was hunched over smiling next to a tall man. The next was Flo, slightly less hunched, smiling next to a woman with great big bushy hair. She followed the pictures, seeing Flo age backward through the images, to the living room. It was exactly what Aniyah expected Flo's living room to look like. The pictures flooded into the room and there were several floral printed pieces of furniture with too many velvet throw pillows. One particular picture caught Aniyah's attention. Inside of an intricate golden frame were two smiling girls with the same big eyes, one pair green, the other blue.

"That's me as a little girl." Aniyah jumped at the voice from behind her. "And that girl next to me was Sophie."

"Is she your sister?" Aniyah asked. "You have the same eyes."

"Ahh yes, she was." Flo took a seat, placing the tea tray she had been holding on the plump ottoman. "But she died a long time ago." There was something strange about the way she said this last statement. Not quite somber, almost guilty, Aniyah thought.

"I'm so sorry, I have a sister too" Aniyah responded quietly.

"You do?" This seemed to perk the older woman up. "Is she older or younger?"

Expecting Flo to ask for her name, Aniyah had to take a minute to think. "She's three years younger than me, still in Highschool."

"Sophie was only a year younger" The old woman took a seat and started pouring the tea. "She was always acting like she was older though. She would try and boss me around like she

knew best." The old woman chuckled to herself settling deeper into her chair. Aniyah wondered what it would be like to lose her own sister, she couldn't imagine not having her around.

"I didn't quite hear you so I brought both," Flo said, abruptly changing the subject and bringing Aniyah out of her thoughts. Flo was staring at her again, her hand outstretched, offering a cup of dark, black tea.

"Thank you." Aniyah accepted the cup from her plump hands. "I wanted to talk to you about the heat. It seems to have given out, and I was wondering if you had looked into getting it fixed?" Aniyah was determined to get this whole issue solved as soon as possible.

"Oh yes the heat," Flo seemed not to be too interested in this topic of conversation. "Would you like any sugar? I have brown or white."

"No thank you," Aniyah said, "and yes the heat. It's been close to 40 degrees in my apartment at night and it's only going to get colder." Pausing for a response and getting none, Aniyah charged on, "I've sent you multiple texts and was wondering if you had called an electrician to check it out? If you have the number of one I'd be happy to place the call now."

"Oh, dear." Flo chuckled, "You are a straightforward one. Sadly, the heating would just break again if we fixed it. So, there's no point in that. But if you'd still like the number of an electrician, I'm sure I can find one somewhere."

What did she mean? "Does the unit need to be replaced? When was the last time you had someone take a look at it?"

"No, no, my dear you still don't understand yet do you?" Flo leaned in conspiratorially and said these next words in a whisper, more for dramatics than any concern of being overheard, "It's them! They're the ones that broke your heater. You must have upset them."

Aniyah said, "I'm sorry?"

“They live here too, haven’t you heard them?” Flo seemed frustrated at Aniyah’s confusion. “They’re the scuttling in the walls, the figure you catch in the corner of your eye.”

"Oh, you mean the mice?" Aniyah was looking for a logical explanation.

Flo let out a great cackle, “Mice?” She laughed again, "I suppose you could call them mice, if mice could talk, and think, and hold a grudge. But they are not. Do you wonder why your mouse traps haven't been working? It's because they are not mice. The heat's broken because of them. You must have made them angry somehow. My guess would be those mouse traps you’ve been putting down."

"How do you know I put down mouse traps?" was all Aniyah could manage.

“That’s not important.” Her eyes seemed to catch something in the corner of the room. Aniyah whipped her head around to see what Flo was looking at. All Aniyah caught was a blur, and... green eyes?

“Right There!” Aniyah called, pointing at that spot. “That’s it! I saw it! What was that?” Aniyah couldn’t keep her voice from raising.

“Shhhhhh," Flo said. “Not so loud, it’s too much!” She clutched her hands to her ears, collapsing in on herself in the stuffed chair.

“I’m sorry I just... I just... I don’t know what’s happening.” Aniyah was starting to panic. There couldn’t really be creatures living in the walls. That only happened in fairy tales and movies. “It has to be mice in the walls. What else could it be? There’s no such thing as elves or fairies or gremlins.”

The old woman regained her composure, sitting up and leaning into Aniyah. “Oh my dear, don’t let them hear you say that.” She scolded, shaking her finger.

October 15, 1979

She had grown close to the creatures in her building, their appearances becoming more frequent over the years. Flo had tried to convince Sophie of their existence, but she wouldn't listen. Flo's vehement insistence only seemed to drive her sister away.

In the beginning, Sophie came over from Arlington almost every weekend to help Flo set things up and take care of the building. But after a while, her visits started to get less and less frequent. Now she never visited unless Flo begged her.

This was one of those occasions.

Sophie stood uncomfortably in Flo's living room, arms crossed, gripping her purse. Flo was in the kitchen making tea.

"I don't know why you asked me to come here," Sophie called through the apartment. "You know this place gives me the creeps."

Flo's hands were shaking as she placed the teacups on the tray. She had to do this, she thought. This had to be done. She tried to compose her face, taking in a deep breath in, 1...2...3...4...and letting it out, 1...2...3...4.... She picked up the tray. "Ouch!" Flo yelped as her trembling hands spilled boiling water all over the counter and down the front of her skirt. She grabbed a towel and frantically tried to mop up the steaming water.

"Here let me help you!" Sophie had made her way into the kitchen without Flo realizing. Flo jumped out of reach from her sister's helping hand. Sophie grabbed the towel from the rack and started wiping up the water from the counter. "Did you burn yourself?" Sophie asked not looking up. She continues to wipe up the mess. When Flo didn't respond Sophie looked at her sister. Her blue eyes met green. "Flo? What's wrong?"

Flo wasn't listening. Her eyes flicked the knife block. It was conveniently right next to where she had jumped. Her hand crept closer to one of the protruding handles.

"Flo?" Sophie asked again, looking at her sister.

"What?!" Flo said, dragged out of her own thoughts.

"Are you okay? Did you burn yourself?" Sophie moved again, closing the gap between her and her sister quickly, arms out in a gesture of comfort.

Flo's heart started to race. She tried to back up away from her sister, away from this, but her back was already pressed to the cabinets, her hands crept closer to block. Her mind went blank as she felt her plump fingers close around the smooth wooden handle of the knife.

The next morning, Flo thought she had made the whole thing up. There was no body, there was no blood. Her nightmares seemed so real sometimes. But this was no nightmare. Flo moved from the kitchen, searching for a body. In the living room, she saw a small gold-framed photo on the wall. It was of her and Sophie as little girls. Their arms were draped around each other, and their gap-tooth smiles seemed so far away.

The phone rang. It was Sophie's only daughter calling to ask if her mother had spent the night with Flo as she hadn't come home last night. No, Flo said. She hadn't spent the night, Flo said. She came over for tea and left before it got dark, Flo said.

February 2, 2021, 3:06 AM

Aniyah tried to forget about her disturbing interaction with Flo. She called an electrician, and he came and went, saying it looked as though something had chewed right through the

chords. See, it was just mice, mice with a taste for electrical wiring. Aniyah knew that Flo was just an old woman who had spent too long alone.

The heat was glorious. Aniyah cranked it up as high as it could go and spent the evening in nothing but shorts and a tank. However, sometime past 3 o'clock in the morning, she woke up shivering. The heat must've turned off, she checked the thermostat, which lied, saying it was a toasty 74 in the apartment, it was clearly not. Dammit, she thought, broken again.

Aniyah made her way to the heating unit located in the closet that also housed the washer and dryer. The electrician had shown her the issue with the chords. Maybe she could just duct tape it until tomorrow.

Turning on her phone's flashlight she crouched down to look behind the big machine. It was a tight squeeze, even for her, and she had to crawl to peek behind. The chords that were supposed to connect the unit to the wall weren't just chewed through, they were missing completely.

2:00 AM

Flo had never actually spoken to the creatures. They communicated through whispers and gifts. When happy, they would leave her small gifts and shiny things, her pillows would stay fluffed, and her floors would be swept. They kept her company at night. They would whisper tales as she fell asleep, her dreams were filled with magical lands and beautiful objects.

They were not happy now. Flo's nightmares had returned with whispers of violence and revenge. Apparently, the girl had killed one of the creatures in a trap. This was not good, she thought. Flo liked Aniyah, Flo had hoped that she would listen, that she would believe. But no one ever did.

Flo had woken from a particularly gruesome nightmare. It was her sister Sophie, alive and well, standing on the edge of a great ravine. Flo had called to her sister from across the chasm, but Sophie couldn't hear her. Her sister jerked suddenly and fell forward, into the ravine. Flo woke.

On her chest sat a kitchen knife with a worn wooden handle.

3:30 AM

Aniyah was still huddled on the floor of her closet. What happened? Where could the chords have gone? It must have been Flo, but she's ancient. She couldn't have made it down the stairs and through the front door without help and why would she steal wires? But who else could it have been?

Aniyah was so caught up in her own thoughts, she didn't hear the footsteps approaching behind her. She only turned when a figure blocked the singular overhead light coming in from the doorframe. Aniyah looked up.

"Flo?" Aniyah asked, realizing the figure was just the plump old woman. "What are you doing here?" Aniyah noticed the knife loosely held in her hand. A big knife. She stood, trying to look for a way around the old woman. Flo said nothing, those big green eyes stared blankly at Aniyah.

Aniyah started to walk slowly around Flo, careful not to take her eyes off that knife. She backed towards the door. Flo's eyes followed Aniyah as she moved, but made no motion herself. In fact, the woman stood so still she didn't seem to be breathing.

When Aniyah's back hit the door she fumbled around for the handle, twisting and yanking, trying to open the door. It did not budge. Suddenly, the single light in her kitchen/living

room/dining room went out, flickering for a second before drowning them in darkness. Aniyah turned and frantically slammed her body against the door. It did not budge. She heard Flo's shuffling slippers getting closer. Her fear erupted in a terrified scream. She threw her body again and again against the door, her fingernails clawing at the wood, but it did not budge.

10:34 AM

Flo woke from a peaceful dream about a glen in the woods. Looking at the clock she was shocked to see it was already past 10. She hadn't slept this late in years. Making her way to the kitchen, Flo began to hum to herself, straightening the frames on her wall, at the very front of the line was a new one. Inside the plain wooden frame stood a hunched over woman, was she really that old? Next to Flo stood a short woman with close-cropped brown hair and a pained expression on her face. In the kitchen, there was a fresh pot of tea, steeped and waiting for her on the counter.