

The Murdered Ghost

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There was a murdered corpse found across the street from us, on the top floor of the vacant house at the end of the block, across the alley from the KFC. The house is no longer vacant. It has been renovated and new tenants have moved into the apartment where the body was found. There are only a couple of vacant houses left in the row now and all of the units on our side of the street are full; I see the windows lit up like eyes in the masonry on my way home at night. The neighborhood is changing.

When the authorities discovered it, the anonymous victim had been hung on a chain from the skylight then set afire and severed at the neck nearly all the way so his body was hanging from the chain by a flap of muscle and skin when they found him. That's what everyone was saying the next morning at the bus stop and on their stoops, around the Hess station and in line at the KFC. The KFC still makes the neighborhood smell like bubbling meat.

More than a year later, the city was done talking about it.

They had moved onto other bits of fatal gossip like the execution outside the Korean restaurant or the out-of-town med student on his cell phone or the burglar who had his arm chopped off with a samurai sword. But my girlfriend and I had not stopped talking about the unsolved immolation/hanging/decapitation.

That was our murder.

We'd stayed up late the night it happened and watched the event out of window. There hadn't been that much activity on our block since one of the neighborhood kids had a birthday party with a full drum line and dancers in top hats and glittery short-shorts. The lights dancing on top of the police cars and fire trucks made the scene look almost festive, which made everything all the more tragic. We made popcorn and watched the men doing their jobs instead of looking at TV that night. We kept all the windows open to let the scene inside. I think both of us wanted something in the air to feel different. We wanted something to reassure us that life was sacred. We wanted to know that something, anything, happens when you die.

Neither of us could resist telling the new tenants about the murder. We walked past their stoop one evening on our way for summer cocktails, made it all the way to the end of the block without saying anything before we had to turn around. The murder was burning the tip of our tongues. We had to let it out to breathe. We had to create a ghost because we thought the murder – a forgotten crime, probably drug-related and of little consequence to the community – deserved one. We thought dead people deserved to have ghosts.

Our new neighbors weren't interested in the murder, much less the ghost. I'm not sure they believed us about either. One of them said "Grody" I think, but that was about it. They haven't said anything since. They look happy and unaware of death when I see them having drinks outside on their stoop. One time they called the neighborhood "vibrant."

The ghost we created still lives here. He wanders the neighborhood. His head hangs off his neck like a hooded sweatshirt. His skin is still on fire and the chain he was suspended

from in death now drags behind him like the leash of an escaped dog. His life as a ghost is simple. He watches the remaining vacants for signs of development. He does a little dance whenever a police cruiser rolls past. He does not search for his killers like the ghosts in the movies. Like everyone else, our ghost has given up on finding them. My thought is that he sticks around to keep our minds at ease about death. It isn't working.