

TREENA THIBODEAU

*My Mother Says this House Is Haunted*

My mother tells people our house is haunted. It's not true. It's her, kicking out the legs of furniture and dropping the thermostat. She just wants attention, but never underestimate the draw of attention. Murders happen over less.

When I get home from band practice, she has an announcement. She looks only at my sister, but I can tell she's been waiting for me. "There's a news crew coming next week," she says, braiding the goblin-green lock of hair that frames her face.

"What for?" I check the latches on my trumpet's case. Sometimes I think it's shut but then it spills out.

"They're covering local hauntings." Our cat, Smudge, glares at the kitchen ceiling, and my mother, concluding her braid, runs a hand along his knobby spine. "I don't know if the ghosts will come out while they're here, but they'll probably want to interview you kids."

My sister Bets says okay and asks if she can wear eyeshadow. I check out the ceiling.

"I don't want to talk to reporters," I say.

"Well, Thorn." My mother takes a wedge of cashew cheese out of the fridge and slaps it on the counter so hard Bets jumps. "No one's saying you have to." A thump on the roof, turkey vultures landing between the solar panels. "Wear whatever you want," she says to Bets.

Bets is eight and stressed out and believes my mother about the ghosts. She has pulled out all her eyebrows on one side, and this makes her look more skeptical than she actually is.

"Can we just get a new house?" she asks.

"We'd leave if your father ever sent any money. You want to move, ask him."

"I don't know where he is, though."

Her third-grade teacher calls every time she doesn't do her homework, saying promotion in doubt, summer school. My grades are okay. I don't want any teachers calling, my mother explaining that the spirits of three murdered people took my desk apart and

that's why I didn't finish my geometry.

"He'll turn up eventually." She tears leaves off a bunch of kale for a salad, rubbing the leaves until they give up and go limp. We are vegan, although I sometimes don't peel all the cheese off when we have pizza at school. It tastes good, not like suffering.

"Can I go do my homework outside?" Bets has a fort out back made from scrap wood, a soggy lean-to she calls a shallot no matter how many times I tell her she means chalet. The shallot keeps collapsing. I pulled all the nails out of the boards so at least she wouldn't get tetanus. My mother says not to encourage her.

"No. It's dark. You need to do your homework. I don't want to hear from another teacher."

"I'll bring a flashlight. Thorn, where's the flashlight?"

"Finish your math," my mother says. "Your brother doesn't know where the flashlight is." Then she winks at me like we put one over on Bets, but I really don't know where my mother hid it this time.

Maybe this news crew will catch my mother faking it. She's got something that beams spectral blobs of light on the walls. I saw it last night, but when I turned around, she was gone. If they catch her, she might finally admit that she made this whole thing up to scare us.

Another thump on the roof.

Bets looks up. She has brown pouches under her eyes, and once when I picked her up from school there was a post-it stuck to her back that said UGLY. "Do the ghosts want to hurt us?" she asks. She asks this question every night.

My mother answers, as always, "They just don't want us to forget they're here."

My mother asks me to set the table, but when I open the silverware drawer, it's empty.

"Where'd you put all the silverware?" I have to play the straight man every time, otherwise she'll hide my bookbag next, and I finished all my homework in the cafeteria and don't want to do it over again.

"It wasn't me." My mother eats late at night on Ambien and then frowns at the mess in the morning, not remembering who made it.

“Did Lisa and Lottie take our forks?” Bets asks.

“The girls usually stay in the walls. I think it’s their mother. She’s angry.”

“Because reporters are coming over?”

“She’s always angry.”

Sure enough, we find most of the silverware in the basement behind the water heater, bent double and ruined.

None of the knives are there. These we find later, evenly distributed beneath each of our pillows.

My mother puts on *Paranormal Activity* while we eat dinner. When my sister asks if we can watch something else, my mother sends her down to the basement to get a bottle of club soda.

Bets comes back empty-handed. “The bulb is burnt out. I can’t see anything down there.” She pinches the bald spot where her eyebrow used to be.

“I keep changing the bulb,” my mother says. “And the ghosts keep burning it out.”

“It’s all bullshit,” I tell Bets when she leaves. “Mom’s just unscrewing the bulb.”

“Why?” Bets asks.

“She just wants attention.”

“She gets attention, though. She’s our mom.”

I don’t have an answer. Smudge winds around my legs. I want a dog. All the kids in my year hate cats, and so the first week of school I pretended Smudge was our dog and now I can’t have anyone over. Plus one time in middle school I brought someone home and he wanted to know what was making that groaning sound in the hall closet, and when I said my mother he told the kids at school. After that, the girls made small despairing noises when our social studies teacher grouped me with them for projects, and when I tried to sit at my usual lunch table, people started making corny *oooooh* ghost noises and everyone laughed.

Anyway, high school just started, and there are lots of new kids and the school has a decent orchestra, and I’m trying out for first chair. When I practice my trumpet, there are knocks on the wall and the temperature drops, but I just put on a sweater.

I go into my mother's bedroom to say goodnight. She's reading, but when I come in, she folds the page and scoots over. I pretend not to notice the invitation. For a solid year after my father left, my mother said she was too depressed for furniture. She fed my sister, still a baby, on the cold kitchen floor. My mother's eyes were as dull as old spoons and she slept on the floor wrapped in a quilt next to Bets's crib until one night something levitated her back to her own bed.

"You have rehearsal tomorrow?" she asks.

"Yeah. I'm going to bed."

I lean stiffly to hug her, and she warns me that one of the girls is in bed with her.

"Which one?" I ask. *Bullshit*, I remind myself, but my stomach turns anyway.

"Lottie, I think. She keeps putting her cold feet on me."

"How come they only touch you?" Sometimes I have nightmares about the ghost-mother. If the news crew reports that my mother is lying, I might stop having bad dreams about her.

"They miss their mother."

I think about how it will be when my mother isn't alive anymore, which is a thought I hate and have all the time. My brain is like a cat that won't stop jumping on a counter. "Their mother is here, though."

"She blames them, I think. For getting them all killed." She's sucking on something.

"What are you eating?"

"Ambien." She sucks on Ambien CR to get the outer coating off before she swallows so she can fall asleep. She is alone but also never alone.

I am also never alone. My mother works from home. She's in cybersecurity and good at being suddenly behind you.

I go for walks in the woods when I want to jerk off, no one watching me but the jays and the juncos.

My father liked birds. I remember him pointing at the trees, saying *phoebe* or *cedar waxwing*. I could never see them. He took photographs with an expensive camera, which he joked was vegan hunting.

"You shouldn't drink coffee at night," I tell my mother. Ambien-Mom makes me nervous.

"Well, you shouldn't practice right before bed. It gets the ghosts riled up."

I have to practice. Freshmen never make first chair. I'm up against a junior named Xythe. Xythe is the kind of person who says her favorite color is orange, just because that is the least popular color. She's the only girl who plays trumpet. Most of the girls play violin or flute, girls I think about when I go for walks in the woods.

Tryouts are after school. I think the band teacher will take us one at a time into the practice room, but we take turns auditioning in the cafeteria in front of everyone. A woman in a hairnet drops a metal sheet tray while I'm performing and I feel an air pocket start to form between my lips and teeth, changing my whole embouchure setup, and I want to ask if I can start over but I don't.

Xythe is up after me. She places the mouthpiece low, right on the red of her upper lip, which they teach you not to do, but Wynton Marsalis does it and so does she. Her septum is pierced. She has ferocious eyebrows, drawn close with concentration.

After, when Xythe is announced as first chair, I plaster a grooved no-big-deal look on my face and go out front to wait by the flagpole for my mother, who's always late picking me up.

Xythe stops her car and rolls down the window and asks if I want a ride and I take one last look around before I open the door and get inside. The footwell on the passenger side is so full of empty 30-ounce soda cups from 7-Eleven that I don't know where to put my legs.

"Congratulations on first chair," I say, and prop my feet on the dashboard.

She looks at my Vans—I let Bets draw horses on them in Sharpie—and her lips twitch. "Thanks." She hands me her phone. "Put your address in the GPS."

I do, and then it's mostly the GPS talking for a while. I see a merlin perched on a powerline and point it out.

Xythe looks in the rearview mirror because we've already gone past it, and her car crosses the spine of yellow into the oncoming lane. "What's a merlin?"

"A kind of falcon. They hunt songbirds." I put a hand on the steering wheel because there's a truck bearing down on us.

She nods a thanks. "Are you into birds?"

"Sort of. My father's a bird nerd." I venture the present tense, even though that feels like lying.

“Cool. Watch the road a sec.” She plugs in her phone and scrolls around until a woman’s voice comes out the speakers, narrating the hard life of Polly Nichols before she was murdered in Whitechapel. The GPS interrupts at the turns along the route.

“Everyone always says Jack the Ripper’s victims were prostitutes,” Xythe says. “But that’s just what the Victorian police said about you if you weren’t married.”

“Oh.” I hunt for something to say about East London or prostitutes but sense she’ll correct me no matter what I say, so I stay quiet, feeling equal parts attracted to her and mad.

“Is Thorn your real name?” she asks.

“Yeah.” The woman on the podcast says Polly abandoned her husband and children. “I’m the only one who got a weird name. My sister is Betsy.” I curl my arms around my trumpet case. “Is Xythe your real name?”

“No.” She steers around a dead possum in the road and pulls up in front of my house and turns the volume down, so I assume she wants to talk to me and I don’t get out. Then we’re both quiet for too long and it’s awkward and I wish I hadn’t waited.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say finally, and heave the door open.

When she puts a hand on my arm, I think maybe she is going to kiss me or something. “Wait,” she says. “Thorn. Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.” My heart hurls itself against the wall of my chest.

“Is it true that your house is haunted?”

I know what she wants me to say. And I know anything I tell her will determine whether she drives me home again after rehearsal.

“My mother says it is,” I say. “There was a murder here in the 1930s. Two little girls and their mom.”

My mother comes hurrying out of the house, late. Smudge slips out beside her, looking for birds to kill.

“You have a cat,” Xythe says. She gives my arm an encouraging squeeze. “I fucking love cats.”

There’s knocking that night on the wall beside my bed.

“I know that’s you,” I say to my mother through the wallpaper.

Lisa and Lottie, the kids who lived here, were four and eleven.

Lisa was stabbed, Lottie set on fire out back. The mother was shot, but it's never been clear if she died trying to protect the kids or if she was just in bed, asleep. All the photos that ran in the paper are of the father, being led off in handcuffs while men in hats stood in our yard, watching.

The knocks are child-size. "Mom." I press my forehead against the wall and I can feel them. "Stop."

Scratching sounds.

I get up and fetch my trumpet. It will wake Bets, but it's the closest thing to yelling I can manage.

Bets and I go with my mother to the mall to buy new silverware. After she's picked out what she wants and argued with the cashier about an expired coupon and won, we go wait for her in the atrium. The reporters are coming tomorrow, and our mother is trying on lipstick after lipstick, scrubbing each failure off her wrinkled lips.

Sometimes at the mall, I look for my father. I don't know why. I want to remember being at the mall with him when I was little, being young enough for him to hold my hand.

For all I know he's dead. His name is Dave Moore, and there are too many Dave Moores on the internet to get a solid lead. I can't even find myself, although I was once on the front page of our local newspaper when we played at the senior center. I don't like that picture because there's a woman in the front row pressing her hands over her ears.

My mother comes out of the store with a tiny shopping bag, perfumed, her lips purple and her eyes damp. She has a dried booger in her nostril.

"Let's scram," she says. "Vamanos."

"Vamanos," Bets echoes, with my mother's forced enthusiasm. She has the rubber ball I bought her from the atrium's vending machine, but when we go outside she loses it under a parked car after one bounce, and I hate them both, because I know I will never be able to feel happy without also feeling guilty.

The newsman comes. He doesn't take his shoes off and I feel disadvantaged in my socks.

Our house is carpeted, one of things that makes it look not

haunted. Also there are hard blue couches and a glass coffee table. We have framed prints of New York City from when my mother lived there: the Flatiron Building, Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, the World Trade Center. The twin towers jut from the skyline, innocent as fingers that don't know they're about to be pinched in a door.

When the newsman comes in, I can tell he's disappointed too. A haunted house is supposed to have creaky wooden stairs with a banister and drapes and a clock that chimes. We only have one floor. Haunted houses are never ranch-style.

"Go get some shots of the kid out back," the newsman says to the camera crew. Through the window, I can see my sister's sneakers sticking out of the shallot. She's in there, reading a book about frogs.

"Hey, bud," the newsman says to me. He looks like his hair was cut with a laser, and I hate him and also sort of want to take my trumpet out of the case to show it off. "Can we talk to you about the house?"

"Thorn doesn't want to be interviewed," my mother says. She wears hammered silver earrings and a cropped leather jacket, and I can't help looking conspiratorially back at her. She is my team.

"I guess it's okay," I say. "You can interview me if you want."

No one has ever asked to interview me before, and I make room for him on the couch, thinking he will sit down next to me, but instead the producer brings over a chair from the dining room table. Then he looks at my mother, who's leaning against the doorframe with her arms folded, her earrings swinging.

The producer says to her, "Can you show me around the rest of the house?"

"There's not much else to see," she says. "Just in here and then the bedrooms."

"Can you show me the basement?"

She gives me one last look and says, "You okay on your own, Thorn?"

I nod because the newsman is looking at me the way men do when they're impatient to talk privately. As soon as we hear the basement steps creak, he gestures to the cameraman and the woman with the sound equipment and says to me like we were talking all along, "So it must be pretty spooky living out here."

"It's okay." My lips stick a little to my teeth. "I mean, some



people were murdered here, but it was a long time ago. The 1930s.”

“Your mother says there’s knocks on the wall and lights in the hallway. Have you heard and seen those things?”

“Yeah. There’s noises and stuff.” Something falls down in the basement. There’s a lot of boxes down there. Things my father abandoned.

“That must be hard for you. Are you scared?”

“Not really. I’ve always lived here. It stresses my sister out, though. I wish it would stop.”

“When did it start?”

You’d think it started after my father left. But I’m pretty sure it’s always been like this. It’s hard to remember.

When I don’t answer, the newsman moves on. “What do the kids at school think?”

“They probably think it’s not true.” They will see this. Xythe will see this. Maybe she will want to come inside, press her studded ear to my bedroom wall, listening.

“How about your father? Your mother tells us he disappeared.” The newsman pauses to let *disappeared* linger. “What did he think about the house?”

I wish my mother would come back upstairs. The camera lens closes in on me. “My father left a long time ago. I was little. I don’t really know what he thought about anything.”

The newsman leans in. He looks like the kids at school, only older. I hold eye contact as long as I can and then Smudge hooks a claw in my shirt and I am grateful for him even if he is not a dog.

“Okay. Tell me honestly, Thorn. We can shut the cameras off, if you want. Do you really believe this house is haunted? Do you believe your mother?”

The orchestra is practicing the fantasy overture from Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It’s not going well; the clarinet players keep laughing about something and the bassoonist needs to get his life together and our teacher keeps interrupting the fugato to yell.

After rehearsal, I don’t want to assume Xythe will offer me a ride but I sort of linger hopefully behind, poking at my phone.

“Hey,” Xythe says, latching her trumpet’s case. “I saw you on TV last night.”

“Oh. Yeah?” It’s up on the local news website, and last night

my mother was drinking a bottle of wine and reading the comments. Bets cried. I went and practiced my trumpet for a while and all the lights flickered.

Xythe's eyes narrow. "They said at the end that it's not even the same house where those people were murdered. I mean, it's on the property, but that house got torn down. This is a new house."

I didn't know that mattered.

Xythe straightens her septum ring. "You shouldn't tell people that someone was murdered in your house. That was a different house."

"I didn't say someone was murdered there. Just, you know." I try one last time: "My mother says our house is haunted."

Someone knocks over a music stand, and in the clatter Xythe walks away. I go outside to wait for my mother's car. It's only 4:30, but it's already gone dark.

If it wasn't for the cat, I might never have caught her.

My mother hadn't shut the back door all the way when she slipped out that night, and I would have just hipped it closed and gone back to practicing except I see Smudge loose on the lawn, his ripple of white fur a beacon for coyotes.

I'm still hearing timpani and low clarinets from rehearsal accompanied by a low hiss I think is a sprinkler except it's November, when everyone lets their grass die. It's cold. I will rescue the cat and practice the trumpet part of the overture for another hour, even though it feels late and hopeless. Tchaikovsky was gay and nervous around people and died of either cholera or suicide, depending on who you listen to. After you die, other people get to tell your story.

Smudge waits until I get within snatching distance and darts away. That's when I see what's making the hissing sound. It's my mother, kneeling beside the shallot with a can of spray paint, the practiced sweep of her arm a hint of the life she had before us.

She's concentrating and she doesn't see me come up behind her, my heart tumbling against the walls of my chest. She finishes the curl-tailed Y on the word *DADDY* in red paint.

I know it will scare her if I clap a hand on her shoulder, yelling *mom* like *boo*. I am a movie jump scare. When I shove her, she topples forward. Her arms wheel out for balance and meet wet paint and rotten plywood.

“What are you *doing*?” I narrow my eyes and wait for her to apologize. Instead she looks at her skinned palms, and I realize: She’s waiting for the same thing from me.

Shaking, I pick up her dropped paint can, my finger on the nozzle. I could spray her in the face, say ghosts made me do it, dare her to argue.

But I just say, “You let the cat out,” and marvel that I sound calm. It’s all the practicing, controlling how much air I let out at a time. “Something is going to eat him.”

“No. He’s too smart for the coyotes.” She holds out her hand, and instead of putting the paint can in it, I chuck it toward the tree line and my mother sighs like she had hoped for better but was not surprised that I didn’t come through.

I wipe my hands on my pajama pants and grit my teeth so they won’t chatter. “How can you do this to Bets?”

“Do what?” When she stands, her knees crack.

It’s dark, but there is her red palm, and I snatch for her wrist. “This! Do this!” I kick at the side of the shallot.

My mother looks at me. No one ever looks at me as directly as my mother. She pinches my chin with her fingers, smelling of paint and cigarettes. “Thorn. Nobody believes me,” she says. “Those comments—that news story—did you read the comments?”

“Yeah. They called you a liar.” I bat her hand away. “You’re lying about the ghosts.”

“No,” she says. “Why would you say that?”

“You have to tell Bets they aren’t real. She doesn’t believe me.”

She sighs and takes a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her sweater. Her lighter sparks but she gets no flame. “They are real.” We watch Smudge slip around the concrete birdbath. The birdbath is an old thing. “I’ll lie to her if you want, Thorn. But I think you know the ghosts are the only thing that keeps her from missing her father.”

“*Her* father?” It’s a dropped note, one you ignore if you want to keep playing. “That’s *our* father.” I don’t want to play.

“You think you know everything.” Her voice is Ambien-flat, and I realize this conversation will be lost to her by tomorrow.

“I used to think you killed him.” I venture, because Ambien-Mom forgets. In the morning she will wonder why it’s red under her fingernails. “*Our* father. And that’s why he didn’t come back.”

“Of course I didn’t kill him.” Smudge comes closer; she

crouches, ready to catch him. “But I cheated on him, Thorn. And he caught me. Right after Bets was born. I left my phone on the table, and he read all my texts.” The wind blows and my pajamas flap against my legs and I want to crawl into the shallot. “You want to know the truth, Thorn?”

“Not really.” I close my eyes and press my numb fingers over the sockets.

“You want to know who your father is?” She puts her arms around me and I can’t help but sag into her. I am so cold, and she is my mother. I nod.

“Me too,” she says, all the bitterness sheared off by the Ambien. “But men are ghosts, Thorn. They’re only here until they’re gone.”

I look back at the house, and a pale face appears in the window. Bets. I lift a hand, and she vanishes.

There is a sweep of headlights, and my mother and I cringe in the exposure. A car slows, leaking music, laughter. Someone says, *two kids got killed there.*

The cat creeps toward us, and my mother curls him into the miraculous safety of her arms.

*Do you believe your mother?* the newsman asked me when we were alone.

I knew that was the only part they would air. My thoughtful silence. Thumps on the roof, those relentless vultures. Me, responding like they knew I would: Yes. Of course. My mother says our house is haunted, and I believe her.