

BARN 2019 DARK AND STORMY PIECE UNTITLED

By Megan Chance

It was a dark and stormy night. The radio crackled with static at every flash of lightning, making Milton Berle's laughter on the Texaco Star Theater sound maniacal. Annie shivered and stumbled through the maze of boxes to adjust the dial. More static, and then the end of an advertisement blasting in perfect clarity, *That's Jello! Yum yum yum, Jello Pudding! Yum yum yum!* Annie cringed and turned down the volume. The house seemed suddenly dark and claustrophobic, shadows blooming in every corner, darkness sliding to dust the sills. So different from the bright fall day she'd first seen the house, with the sky that deep autumn shade of blue and the leaves outside shivering golden and red. Such a sweet house, with a perfectly symmetrical face, windows set like eyes above a nose of a porch roof and stairs like a smile.

"You'll love it here, I know," the landlady had said, taking her into the kitchen, with its cheery yellow wallpaper. "All the appliances are brand new. Hotpoint." She ran her hand along the gleaming surfaces. "They just long to be used, can't you feel it?"

"Oh yes," Annie said politely.

"I know you'll do them proud. I can always tell."

Annie had smiled and promised to and thought little of the lie. She'd wanted the house. But now the living room felt oppressive. She went into the kitchen, wanting the happy yellow wallpaper. It was less crowded there too, fewer boxes, her collection of pots and pans being what it was—that is, nearly nonexistent. Which meant that the box in the corner stood out. That same box from before. The landlady said it would be gone when she moved in, but here it was. Some

leftover of the previous tenant, apparently, who had not been there long. “Barely unpacked,” shrugged the landlady. Conspiratorially she’d said, “There were rumors.”

“Rumors?”

The woman’s face froze, as if she’d just realized she’d misspoken. “Oh, nothing about the house. She ran off with someone. Some grand passion. She just up and left one day. But don’t worry about the box. I’ll have it removed.”

Yet here it was. Taped up, with the word KITCHEN scrawled upon it in thick black marker. Annie sighed and picked it up take to the garbage. It wasn’t heavy, and whatever was inside rattled around loosely. But when she opened the door, the rain and the wind pressed her back. No point in going out in this. It would wait until tomorrow. She set the box on the floor again and shut the door.

The rain pounded the window. From the living room, the radio cackled again, dropping the narrator’s voice, and then snapping sharply into an ad for Crisco. *It’s all vegetable. It’s digestible.* Irritating, wasn’t it, how the only thing that actually came in were the advertisements. Annie stared at the box and wondered what the previous tenant left behind. Maybe there was something she could use. She stripped off the tape, and opened it. Inside were—what was all this? The same stuff her mother had always insisted she have. *Every good wife needs them for pies and such.* No wonder the tenant had left them. Annie had left behind her own drawerful. Apple peelers and strawberry hullers and melon ballers. Why, she’d had this peeler too, with a red handle, and that melon baller had the rust spot in the same place. Infuriating, wasn’t it, when it hadn’t been used a single time? Annie had always felt the thing had formed the rust spot just to

reproach her.

She had never been the sort to bake pies or make pretty fruit salads or spend her hours keeping her house immaculate. The world was too big. There was too much to do.

Suddenly his chiding voice was in her head again. *Why is this place always so filthy? What do you do all day that you can't manage to dust? Sally Johnson makes a good dinner for her husband every night, and I come home to this crap?*

What did one have to *do* to escape? How far did one have to go? Don't think of it. How tired she was of thinking about it.

She turned back to the box, idly rifling through it. How funny that this woman had owned all the same things. That wooden spoon had a burn mark on the exact spot as Annie's, from where she'd laid it on the stove and run to get the mail and ended mesmerized by the murmurations of the starlings; here too were the same canning lids her mother had sent, as if Annie ever had any intention of making applesauce from the trees in her back yard, and the knife—

Annie stilled. The knife. No, it wasn't possible. It couldn't be. She'd thrown the knife into the lake. It could not be here, in this box. But there it was, encrusted with dried blood and bits of his dark hair. Her knife. No.

These weren't the previous tenant's things. They were hers. But that couldn't be. She'd brought none of them here.

His breathing was loud over her shoulder. She grabbed the knife and twisted to see him, but of course he wasn't there. He couldn't be there. He was buried a thousand miles from here.

That night, she had been at the stove. She had heard his breathing over her shoulder. *Scrambled eggs again? Why don't you make those stuffed peppers that Sally made for us when she invited us to dinner? She says they're easy. Even you should be able to make them.* She had turned to see him standing there, his shirt half open, that beer in his hand, and she had simply ... stabbed him.

Twenty times.

They'd never found the murder weapon. They'd never discovered what happened. An intruder, she'd told them, and they never questioned her. Now, she stared down at the knife in her hand. It was not hers. Hers was at the bottom of a lake. Just as all these things were not hers. She threw the knife back into the box and shut it, and then she picked it up to take to the garbage, damn the storm.

But the door would not open. No matter how she tried. The door would not open. Annie dropped the box; everything spilled, scattering across the floor, and she beat upon the door, rattling the knob. It was stuck fast; it would not budge, and yet she'd opened it only a few minutes ago. The sound of breathing intensified, hard and fast in her ear. The radio in the other room grew louder, more crackling, more static, the blinding flash of lightning, the crash of thunder, and the mindless, endless *Mr. Clean gets rid of dirt and grime and grease in just a minute. Mr Clean will clean your whole house and everything that's in it.*

She ran from the kitchen to the front door, but it too would not open, and suddenly the walls pulsed, the breathing became a heartbeat. Annie ran to the stairs, which shifted beneath her feet like those in a carnival funhouse. She slammed her hands on either side to keep her balance.

The walls were like putty; her palms left an impression when she drew them away. The breathing ... his breathing, her breathing, the house ... the house was breathing, and the jingle on the radio, distorted by static, the singsong ad, the thunder and lightning and the rain. But no, it was all in her head. They'd told her this confusion would go away. She was still grieving, they'd said. Such a terrible thing to happen. Find a house of her own, a place to recover, peace and quiet, and perhaps, her mother said, the restorative baking of pies ...

Now the walls vibrated, then became elastic, a womb jerking with life, there a foot, there an elbow, something inside trying to escape or waiting to be born, she couldn't tell. It was rolling and languid, stretching as if searching for more space, and downstairs Milton Berle laughed at some joke and Annie touched the wall tentatively this time, feeling, searching. Her fingers slipped through. She tried to pull away, but she was held fast, and on the radio Milton Berle said, "What do you think about stuffed peppers for supper tonight?" and someone else said, "I think that would be *divine*! Shall we ask Annie to make them?"

The wall tugged. Annie fell. It sucked her inside with a rasping gasp and swallowed her. Lightning flashed and the radio sputtered with static and went dead.

The house quieted. In the kitchen, the box sealed itself up and slid into the corner to wait patiently.