

Sanctuary

by Madeleine Dougherty

It was room 2146. It had laid empty for years. Housing had tried to fill it every semester, but within weeks of a student moving in, either something rather important would break irreparably so that the student would have to move out or the student would take it upon themselves to leave, usually having to undergo some type of psychiatric treatment afterward. A couple even ended up in body bags. It wasn't a safe room, but nobody could figure out why. So, the housing department kept trying to fill it every new semester.

It was a single room, too, very attractive feature. People started noticing that if only one person lived in the room, they lived longer. This knowledge eventually reached the ears of the resident director who passed it on to the housing management. One assistant loved to tell how the room became a permanent single in about the time it took for Mary, the director, to run back to her computer.

“And run she did. She didn't waste a step or a keystroke getting that room changed.”

You might ask why they didn't just close off the room entirely. Anyone will tell you that when the freshmen come in, they need every little spot available. They'd even use the utility closets if they could. And it's not like the room was cursed. It was just...special. Students of all grades used to live happily and healthily in the room all the time. It was only recently when a professional student was around long enough to even identify a pattern. Before that, the turnover was so fast no one noticed that people who were transferred to the room just as quickly transferred out, if they were lucky.

It was hard to say what was wrong with the room. Over the summer, it was fully functional when the repair men checked it. As soon as fall came, the electricity would completely die in just that room. Or the water would turn off. Or the internet would be non-existent. But if something like that didn't happen, then that would be a bad year. Two out of the ten documented times that the room stayed functional, the resident died. Four others are still locked in psych wards, two of which are now over their fifties. The other four left the college and age getting help. Their therapists thought it pertinent to share the information they had gathered about the room from sessions with their patients. They said they "heard screams through the walls." They would go outside to find where they were coming from, but the screams would disappear as soon as they "opened the door, or even touched the doorknob." They would hear "voices, just murmurs really" when listening to music. Eventually, at night, they all began to have the same dream. It would involve at some point dreaming of lying in bed and having someone's face right at their head level, staring at them. Sometimes the head would rise up from below the level of the bed. The face was different for each person, but it was always someone that frightened the student in real life: a horror movie killer, their father, an enemy from the past.

The two that had died complained to their friends of similar things happening. They also each had the room to themselves as a single. All of the ten did, but these two lived there the longest. Jane, a sophomore, lasted till September before gouging her eyes out with a piece of the bathroom mirror. Her boyfriend said that she had begun to see things everywhere. She saw blood coming out of people's eyes, and a dark figure, a person that Jane never identified. She would simply shout that, "He was there!"

Caleb lasted the longest; all the way to the very beginning of May. He was graduating in a few weeks. His friends said that he had complained about the voices and dreams, but just stopped by March. One close friend said that he had been overjoyed at finding a solution.

“Caleb was deaf, so he just took out his hearing aids. It was the dreams that got to him. He finally found a sleeping pill. It helped to keep the vividness of the dreams to a minimum, so that he could sleep through the night and not remember the dreams in the morning.”

Caleb died from an overdose of sleeping pills a week before he graduated.

So from these accidents and quirky happenings, the legend became that the room was haunted. It was a tale maintained by the seniors, but for all their efficiency in telling the new students and reminding the old, the story never stayed the same. Some believed that it was a boy who killed himself when his girlfriend left him. Romantically tragic. Others believed it was the spirits of a girl and her professor who were killed by the professor's wife, and were now doomed to watch the living. The professor was said to be teaching a course on optometry. He and his new wife are now living happily in Florida. One rather interesting fellow believed the haunting to be, not a spirit, but all the spiritual energy of the students tortured by finals throughout time.

I wonder what they would have said upon learning the truth. It was the ghost of a man. A man in his twenties who had a rather brilliant mind for math. But for all the encouragement from his parents to go into mathematics, he stuck with his love for history. He was from a time when all the dorm rooms were singles, when it was still rare for women to be attending college. Robert was a charismatic man, sweet and funny. Very casual, too. He insisted that his friends call him Bob, and he had quite a few friends. Lots of them girls. Women flocked to his flirty smile and polite manners. He knew how to wine and dine, and successfully brought every girl back to his

room at the end of the night. They all lived with their parents while he lived on campus alone. Unfortunately for each of them, Bob was a one night stand kind of guy. He used each for a fun night, and he was so wonderful, they let him. They remained friends, confidants even. All the girls formed a support group that each new girl joined with the commonality of having one night with Bob. They did not begrudge Bob's short attention. He was too kind and gentle, too loving and considerate when he was with them no matter for how short a time. They were happy just to have that one night followed by his eternal friendship. He would remember birthdays and holidays with little personal gifts when their boyfriends would not. He could give great advice on clothes and hairdos. He earned their trust and loyalty. Bob was just as good to his male friends. He helped them in classes and gave advice about girls. He was also deceptively fast and strong. Though he did not play sports for the school, he was always good for a friendly game after classes. He was an all-around perfect girl except the hobby he took part in on the week ends

Robert killed people. He went out of his way to stalk and murder random people. He never settled on a particular victim profile or weapon of choice. It didn't matter: male, female, blond and blue eyes, black hair and brown eyes, a gun, a knife, a candlestick, or his own hands. He just enjoyed killing people, no rhyme or reason. He killed people in towns a two-day's drive away, and he killed people on campus. His two rules were no witnesses and keep it clean. The police couldn't connect the dots. No one thought it was just one person. Each murder was blamed on someone else, someone close to the victim. He was very careful not to make the same mistakes as the other serial killers. He didn't keep trophies or signify his kills in any special way. He didn't take anything or keep anything. He grabbed his weapons from his victims' houses. Wrenches from the toolshed. Golf clubs from the garage. Piano wire from the baby grand. He

was versatile and creative. Because he didn't imagine or retain any outlandish obsessions with his victims, he was able to get in and out clean. He never stole or raped. He just senselessly, needlessly killed people.

On good days, when Bob could really focus his time on his victims, he would try to create viable evidence and motive for a relative or friend, ensuring that the case would be closed quickly.

But this wouldn't be a ghost story about a young man if he didn't die in some horrific way in the prime of his life. Bob made a mistake. The err is human. He strangled a sophomore who was walking home late. The rope he used cut into her neck as she struggled. Blood splattered the pavement and a cinderblock wall. It dripped off the long, thin leaves of an oleander bush long after Bob left the scene. He sought out his bag that he had stashed under the bushes of a path between the houses. He changed quickly into spare clothes, wrapped his bloody ones and gloves in a plastic bag, then wiped his face, hands, and shoes with a towel moistened by a water bottle. The police later came to the conclusion that the girl's brother had been the one to tear into her neck as he raged against his unrequited love for her after learning of her impending engagement. Bob just always got lucky like that.

Except the brother wasn't arrested. He ran in his innocence, swearing to find her real killer. He searched everywhere rather ineffectually as he also kept ahead of the police. He had virtually nothing to go on. No witnesses, evidence, or clue of any kind. It was only dumb luck that his running happened to put the brother, Michael, in the position to witness Bob's next murder. He saw Bob smother a girl at the popular make out spot as he was hiding in the woods. He investigated Bob as much as he could at the local library without getting caught. He had no

idea that Bob had done this before. He believed his sister to be victim zero. He worked as the police might, creating a profile. He researched homicides involving young girls and found several, but for each case it was believed that a male close to the victim was the offender.

Michael took the courts findings to be true. He could only attribute two murders to Bob: the one he witness and his sister's, and the latter one he had no proof of. Michael wanted vengeance for his sister, so things like proof and evidence had little meaning. He took action.

He followed Bob. Waited for him to leave his dorm room, and left him a note proclaiming his (false) knowledge that Bob was the responsible party for the sister's and the anonymous girl's deaths. He challenged Bob to come out and face him, face his judgement day. Michael promised no police involvement unless Bob refused to come, then Michael would immediately alert the authorities.

Bob didn't want to go, didn't want to give in to this raving loony. He knew Michael couldn't possibly have proof, but by saying he did he could make things very difficult for Bob. Suspicion was an ugly virus that was almost impossible not to catch and only slightly less impossible to relieve. So, he went down to the closed golf coarse at midnight to clean up this mess.

Michael was waiting in the shadows of the clubhouse, ready with a gun and cuffs. He planned to make a citizens arrest only if Bob proved to be truly remorseful. Bob wasn't remorseful, and he wasn't stupid. He snuck around behind Michael to where he could easily stab him. The wound to Michael's kidney didn't work to bring him down, too much adrenaline was keeping him upright. He pulled away and turned, trying to shoot Bob. The bang set Bob's left ear to ringing. Punches were thrown and both weapons dropped. Michael grabbed Bob's knife and

tried to strike. The tip of the blade successfully cut a long line down the right side of Bob's face through his right eye to where it curved in to pass just at the edge of Bob's mouth and off his chin. Bob screamed, and managed to push Michael away before the knife plunged into his chest. Michael fell back. Bob scrambled for the gun he could see only from its glint in the moonlight. He shot twice, then a third time at Michael's head. The night was still. No crickets or late night birds. Just the crunch of gravel as Bob took back his knife and left.

Later, in his dorm room, he collapsed on the bed. He slept fitfully as the wound on his face and bullet hole in his chest leaked too much blood into his blankets and the mattress below. The last thing he was aware of was the sharp scent of gunpowder, the warm blood cradling his cheek, and the crippling sting of his injuries.

The semester was about to end, so the university worked with the police to keep the discovery of Bob's body as quiet as possible. No one ever found out the truth. The story was that someone had broken into the dorm and killed Bob, just like all the other random murders that had been happening around the city. The police were the only ones to know of the connection between Bob and Michael's deaths because they had found the murder weapons laying beside Bob's bed.

Now, Bob's ghost haunts room 2146. He can't do much, only scare people. It takes a lot of energy to touch or moves things. He can only whisper, nudge dreams, make people see things if they are scared enough. Not a very good existence for someone who is used to getting what he wants. He is doing surprisingly well for something with so little real power. He's flexible, adaptable. The one thing he wishes he could change, besides the obvious, is the scars. His

wounds from that night left very clear scars on his incorporeal form. He was rather attractive before he died. He wished he had stayed that way.

It had been six years since the room had had its last tenant. With Jane being the last one, housing had given up. It was when the rooms in another dormitory flooded in August that they needed every available space. Mara was entering her last year of college. She thought that with her heavy workload, she was going to splurge on a single room. She was lucky that one was available even after the flooding. All the resident advisors were warned to keep a lookout for suspicious behavior. The dormitories would all be renovated over the next summer, so they only had to deal with the room for one more year before it could be boarded up for good. They began a countdown, just as Bob did.

It was usually by the third week that Bob was able to evict all except the most stubborn. As Mara moved in, he had to wonder, if only for his sanity, how long the new girl would last. Mara, being a senior, immediately began putting her room to right: hanging posters, making the bed, setting up the computer and co. She situated her knick knacks along her bookshelf. There were figurines of gothic angels and jewel-tone dragons. Dragons with sharp little teeth curled around their hatching eggs or treasure chests, skulls littering the rocks of their beds. Angels with fierce-looking swords and wild wings stretched up and out. All of them ready to do battle.

Mara surprised Bob a bit. He had become used to the quiet, so he found himself frozen in thought at times, especially when she slept. He had not yet begun to play with her dreams. Mara was able to sneak up on him in these moments as she got up to dress. She was a quiet little thing on tiny cat feet. He liked her which just meant that he would torture her even more. It was over the first weekend that Mara stayed in and fully settled into the room. Usually it took weeks more

for people to be comfortable in the room, but it was during the first weekend that Mara strutted around naked after her shower as she dried her hair or that she curled up nude in warm blankets against the frigid air conditioning which was turned all the way up to combat the hot, hot August air.

She was just a girl, not that different from the women he had known when he was alive, but so incredibly dissimilar. She was sweetly colored with peach-touched skin and chocolate eyes. In all that beauty, her hair was best feature. It wasn't sharp, startling blonde, or negative black, or fierce red. It was a delicious brown, dark and unhighlighted, made of shadows. It was the color of your favorite teddy bear soaking wet. Her hair was soft, too soft, almost like smoke. It was feathery and voluminous with gentle waves. It was the type of hair that made Bob desperately wish he was corporeal, so he could sink his hands into it and feel it coating them like water. The hair was thick and heavy, yet even in the heat, Mara kept it long down to the rise of her bottom.

Most of all the time either her clothes or her hair fully covered the tattoo on her back, but Bob was able to inspect it when Mara fell asleep lying on her stomach letting her skin cool from the shower that had turned her into a lobster. Mara had two big wings curving along her shoulder blades and falling down to the dip of her lower back where the tips flicked over her hips. The wings were black. Each rib on each feather was visible. They created a weight of black, but the detail and shading made them look almost real especially when she stretched. The way they were folded, each part -- the alula, the marginal coverts, the scapulars -- placed properly along her back, made them move as she moved. She was rather flexible as a dancer. Her movements, just the smallest hand gesture, were elegant and smooth. She had a great amount of control over her

body. Bob couldn't tell what major she was in. She had a wide range of interests. She choreographed while listening to her music device. She read history books and completed math assignments. She wrote in a journal, and she watched crime TV shows. The journal you might think to be the most important of her items for Bob to be interested in, but no. In all his years as a ghost, Bob found journals and diaries to be the most boring.

Mara was a rather curious girl. She had no friends to really speak of, just classmates and acquaintances. She called no one but her mother. She was organized, but a bit messy as clothes and graded assignments were pushed out of the way into corners. And she spent most of her time surfing the internet. Curious of all, his cold touches and little appearances went unnoticed. Mara kept quiet and ignored Bob, if she was even aware of his presence. He waited for a flinch or a shiver, but nothing happened. By the third week, Bob was more than prepared to begin infiltrating and teasing her dreams. Her unresponsiveness made Bob all the more desirous to hear her scream.