

THE DIARY OF ALIZA SCHULTZ EPISODE 13: "UNABANDONED HOUSES" BY RAFAEL MUSLANI

Elisabeth Rivet was perturbed. She had been told that this house would be beautiful once it had been renovated, that it would only take a few thousand dollars and a bit of elbow grease, but it seemed to her that she had just purchased a dressed-up pile of lumber, the housing equivalent of a lemon. She thought that the city must have been so hasty to part with it for so little because there was nothing to salvage, though they would attribute it to some sort of beautification and restoration project. Elisabeth had seen old buildings, had been inside of them, had turned them into hip, gentrified, clean houses. This was a rare miss for her, poor intuition on her part. Three bedrooms, two baths, an unfinished basement, and a non-trivial tetanus risk posed by exposed nails from exposed floorboards.

Houses at this level of neglect are loud. Everything in every room seems to want to succumb to the pull of gravity. Elisabeth's footsteps added just enough energy to the equation to set those things in motion: a creaking floorboard, the floors and flimsy plaster walls shaking, the detritus of the living that occurred here previously falling from piles toward the ground, entropy writ large. The whole house smelled musty, like dust on top of dust. She was opening the windows as she went through the house on her first tour that evening, the windows that would open, anyway.

There were no lights inside the house. The electricity had been turned off some time ago and she hadn't brought a flashlight, hoping that window light would suffice for this first inspection. Fall was setting in slowly, the early sunsets preceding the cool evening temperatures by a couple weeks. Since she was touring the house after her 9-5 day job, it was becoming dusk by the time that she got a good look at the whole place. Twilight came on slowly, her eyes adjusting with the fading light until at some point that it became clear that there wasn't much light left to adjust to. The new moon only exacerbated and hastened the darkness inside of the house.

Tired from her day, she leaned against the kitchen countertop and thought about what she might do with the house. She entertained the idea that she could pay to have it demolished and sell the land that it was on. She knew that was an option, but it felt like such a waste. It wasn't much, but there was a structure here. She could do something with it, surely. Someone had built this house at one point, a whole crew of people, even. All of that work squandered, for what? All because it sat for a little too long and the woman who bought it was too lazy to do something about it? That didn't feel right. She felt overly sentimental in how she justified fixing up the house to herself, but she was happy to indulge in that sentimentality. It made her feel warm, like the world around her was alive, abandoned houses and all.

After some light creaking and buckling from the fibers in the wood that constituted the kitchen countertop, the house reached a new, temporary equilibrium as Elisabeth leaned there, mostly still and quiet. She was in a state that many call "lost in thought," though not the kind where there is a clear and running inner monologue, the kind that might be spoken out loud. It was halfway between that and a meditative, emptied out state. She was tired and generally not very focused. She

didn't know what to do with the house. It was pleasant enough in the dark, in the quiet, with the window open, a fresh breeze replacing the old air with new air. She thought about the breeze for a moment. It was strange how stuffy the house was, considering that it was also quite drafty. It seems like there should have been plenty of air movement to keep things from getting so musty, but the facts were the facts. The house smelled like moss and mold and dust.

It was in this quiet that she heard another sound. It was not the sound of a house settling or even a house falling apart. It sounded deliberately tonal, like a voice. It wasn't coming from the room that she was in. It sounded like it was coming from somewhere in the house, muffled by walls and doors, floorboards and ancient plumbing. She had just been through the house, multiple trips through every room actually. She hadn't brought anyone with her. If there was someone in the house, then they came unannounced and uninvited.

"Did I leave the door open or unlocked?" she wondered. She couldn't remember. She thought that she had locked it, not out of fear of someone intruding but rather out of habit, something that she had been taught as a child and that had probably never successfully thwarted a break in but that she did every day regardless. She heard the tonal sound again.

"Is that even human?" the next thought to surface. It didn't seem like an animal call, nor a bark, nor birdsong. It sounded like loud humming, like the humming one might do if they were trying to vocalize as loud as possible without opening their mouth. It gestured towards musicality, but did not have a clear melody, at least not from what Elisabeth could hear from in the kitchen.

It was with dread that Elisabeth realized that she hadn't checked the unfinished basement since she got there. She had heard stories of squatters living in abandoned houses and only getting discovered years later after the property changed hands. She had never dealt with it personally, but this is what her mind fixated on as she heard the sound continue. "What an inconvenience for both of us," she thought. She sympathized deeply with anyone who would resort to living in a house like this, hiding during the day so as not to lose their only shelter, likely understanding that a new owner meant that they would need a new place to live now.

She didn't want to get the cops involved. If there was a squatter in the basement, maybe they could work something out. Maybe they could help her fix up the house in exchange for a wage that they could use to rent a place that was actually livable. Nobody needed to get kicked out by the cops all because Elisabeth Rivet got spooked by some humming. She wasn't even planning to live there, even after she cleaned the place up.

She brought up the flashlight on her phone, a paltry light that wouldn't suffice even under the best conditions and made her way to the door of the basement. She was unarmed. There wasn't anything to arm herself with. There were floorboards that she briefly entertained trying to pull up by hand to have one just in case something attacked her, but they were fairly stuck in place despite their creakiness.

"Hello? I'm here. Someone's here. My name's Elisabeth," she said as she found the door to the basement. The humming stopped. Did it stop as soon as she spoke?

She tried to recall if she was still hearing it as she made her way through the house but she couldn't remember. She spoke loudly and clearly, in case it was a person and someone was hearing her speak, someone who might be afraid. "I bought this house. I was here to see how to fix it. I'm not calling the police. I'm not going to kick you out. I just want to talk," she said, trying to strike a demeanor between loud and authoritative and calm and reassuring.

"I'm going to open the door now," she warned. She waited one more moment for the person she suspected was on the other end of the door to respond to her. Nothing. She opened the door.

The basement was pitch black and even mustier than the rest of the house, to the point where the smell hit her face as she opened the door. This did not surprise her. It was underground, after all. She shined her light through the doorway and saw nothing, just a few wooden stairs leading down. She couldn't even see the floor of the basement, though she could tell it was a short set of stairs leading down there. Curious, but aware of the obvious potential danger, she poked her head through the doorway and into the basement. She still could see very little, just a patch of concrete at the bottom of the set of stairs. Cautiously, she put a foot out and stepped onto the first stair of the basement. The old wood creaked under her foot. She still could not see. She took another step down, her feet being on the first and second steps respectively at this point. Still more concrete, but nothing else. She began to think that the basement might be smaller and emptier than she had thought.

Elisabeth glanced over her shoulder just in time to see a figure move and block the doorway to the basement behind her. It came from the same direction that Elisabeth had come from, as though it had followed her from the kitchen. It was tall. It had a long, ellipsoid head that stretched above the top of the doorframe so that she couldn't see the top of it. Turning her light, she could see that the figure, the creature, was completely naked, though it did not register to her as a human. It had what must have been sensory organs on its "face" and a bipedal structure, like an imitation of a human. She could not make out any further detail.

Elisabeth froze in horror. She wanted desperately to run up the stairs to safety, but the figure remained in the doorway. There was no escape. It looked at her. She thought it looked at her. Then, in much less time than it takes to describe it, in an instant, it extended a long, yellow arm, an arm with no hand at the end of it, and pushed Elisabeth hard in her solar plexus, sending her hurtling backwards down the steps. She scrambled as she fell, finally making it back onto her stomach and looking up at the creature from the last two steps into the basement. She shone the light on it. It looked strange, pale yellow, elongated in the light from her phone. It pulsed slightly, different colors dancing across its flesh as it appeared to look down on her. Then, without the creature moving at all, the door to the basement slammed hard, leaving Elisabeth in the basement with just the light from the phone.

She scurried up the steps, not getting up off of all fours until she made it all the way to the door. She tried to open it in vain. It was locked. She knew that it would be locked but she still had to try. Why slam the door without locking it, after all? She recognized instantly that she was trapped. Whatever that creature was had lured her

into the basement with the intent of locking her in there. She had fallen, literally, into its trap.

She looked down at her phone: no service. Not surprising for a place on the edge of town inside of a basement, surrounded by cement walls blocking the signal. She sent an all-caps text message to her partner, hoping that they would receive it if the phone got the tiny bit of signal it needed to send a text. They knew that she was going to be checking out the new property and they knew the address. If Elisabeth didn't make it home to dinner that night, the house is the first place that they would look for her.

In the meantime, horrified and confused though she was, Elisabeth decided to descend the stairs and search for something to break down the door with. She wasn't strong enough on her own, but if there was something that she could use in the basement, she might be able to do it. It was a wooden door. The idea of breaking it down wasn't a far-fetched one. If there were a crowbar or something of that nature in the basement, she stood a chance of breaking out. She could decide whether or not that was something that she wanted to do after she found the means to do it. She descended the steps into the basement, keeping the light in front of her.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and shone the light around. The darkness was thick. It almost felt as though it were rejecting the photons from the light. Stepping with uncertainty, she made it to a wall and began to follow it. It was after a few steps along the wall that she found a mirror. She saw her reflection in it: gaunt, pale, scared... not holding a phone with a flashlight. She squinted at it. The mirror did not reflect the light off of its surface. The Elisabeth in the reflection was not holding the phone. It was not a mirror. It was another Elisabeth, trapped in the darkness. The other Elisabeth did not speak. She stared forward silently.

Elisabeth shined the light around in a panic. Another form, another form, another form, another. As she uncovered the contents of the basement, she found nothing to break down the door with, but did find 6 facsimiles of herself, in varying states of disarray and decomposition, all of them alive, breathing and moving, but not speaking a word. The most distorted one appeared to have begun to melt into the concrete floor of the basement, the distinction between her torso and the floor impossible to discern in the low light. Her body waved in the corner, like a palm frond in the breeze. The other Elisabeths mulled about silently, most of them still being able to move freely. There was nothing else in the basement, just the 7 of them.

Elisabeth wondered how many times a new form had come home to her partner instead of the one who left home. She wondered if she was one of those forms. She wondered if her partner knew, if they were in on it, whatever "it" was. She wondered why there were so many of them down there, why they didn't work together to break down the door. She wondered if the creature was still in the house or if it had taken her identity and was impersonating her. She wondered how much longer the light would last, if she should turn it off to save the battery or if that would do her any good. She wondered if she was going to be down here until she died, or worse, until she was reduced in the same way that the forms around her had been reduced, familiar but alien.

She wondered in this fashion until her inner monologue... finally... stopped.