

2020 Horror Story Contest

Second Place: "The Necromancer"

Nathaniel Fraticelli

It wasn't out of the ordinary to see June Kovacs digging through the custodial closets of Baylor Street Apartments. There she could be found on her hands and knees, rummaging in crowded, dusty corners, looking for something. Nobody paid much attention, because nobody cared. June was uninteresting to most of the other residents, even unsightly. Her unkempt, salt-and-pepper mop of hair, her bland wardrobe, and the unfortunate, lingering scent of urine that followed her everywhere she went made sure of this. Yes, everyone steered clear of June, and that suited her just fine.

Some of the more imaginative residents suspected that June wasn't quite right. They couldn't decide if it was in a pitiable, 'bless her heart' kind of way, or whether she should be hospitalized for her own safety. Some wondered if she was an obsessive hoarder; that given the right circumstances, an unsuspecting pizza delivery could end in tragedy with a landslide of old newspapers and cat feces. The police would be forced to cart June away for criminal negligence and manslaughter. Others thought more conventionally. "Old people can be crack addicts, right?," they would say. "Then she's a crack head."

Like many curiosities in life, this one would remain a mystery for the gossips of Baylor Street. In the coming weeks, June had failed to make appearances at her usual haunts around the complex. Additionally, the third floor was beginning to host a peculiar smell that only grew stronger as time passed. "Finally consumed by her own filth," said one. "Snorted your last line, crack head," said another. The rumors circulated, but the general consensus was that June Kovacs had finally keeled over, and it was time to call the police.

The police advised the occupants to vacate the area while they conducted their search. They had seen this before, and what experience told them was that no one wanted to be around for the stench. As the door was pried open, the smell of death filled the halls of the third floor. What was found was beyond explanation. Red, incandescent light shone through a thin haze of dust, clouding the cramped entryway. Ruinous stacks of leather-bound books inscribed with strange characters and

symbols climbed to the heights of the ceiling. Cages and traps were discovered, filled with the decaying corpses of rats and skinks; typical dwellers of apartment broom closets. Last was found the body of June Kovacs, nearly unremarkable, save for the large maw opened at the base of her neck. She was resting on her kitchen floor, surrounded by extinguished candles. Eldritch text and hieroglyphics were scrawled on the walls in what looked like charcoal and clay. Next to her body was a smaller biped, about the size of a child. Its pallid skin was interspersed with scales and fur. Upon second glance, a small tail could be seen sprouting from the back of the homunculus creature. Its body was cold, and to the casual observer, it died of natural causes. In the corner, surrounded by more candles, stood a framed picture of a young mother holding a new-born baby.

The death was ruled a homicide, but the case went so far up the ladder that the local police never heard about it again, let alone the residents of Baylor Street. In years following, it was said that voices could be heard from the condemned apartment on the third floor; a crying baby, the reassuring voice of a mother. Most residents considered this ridiculous. June and her creation were as dead as anything that ever died, and they didn't make a peep.