

The Warding Bell

The building was a complete surprise. Rose had thought, for the great location next to the university and remarkably reasonable price, that her new apartment would be a ramshackle affair. Instead, here was this tidy modern triple-decker with white siding and pretty blue trim. The most run-down thing about it was the mezuzah hanging on the jamb, corroded over until it was only recognizable by its position, with a tiny bell hanging off the bottom. She kissed her fingers and touched the mezuzah for luck. Then she tried her key, thinking she *must* be at the wrong address.

But the door opened for her, leading to an even nicer interior. The main entrance led onto a cherry-wood staircase wide enough for two people to pass comfortably with curved banisters. There was plush green carpeting in the halls, and the landings boasted small common rooms with the same décor, with the addition of dark brown leather couches. Framed portraits hung above each couch, displaying young men and women in 40's styles- updone hair and muted colors, some in military uniforms.

Rose's apartment was on the third floor. No one else was likely to be here until tomorrow. The landlord, Mark, had told her that he normally took a vacation in the time between semesters, so even he wouldn't be around to see her in, and everyone else wouldn't move in until next week.

Her apartment was, stunningly, as nice as the rest of the building, if empty. She practically flew around it, turning on all the lights to reveal its niceties: hardwood floors, a large front room, a galley kitchen, but with black marble countertops and nearly new

appliances. Her bathroom had a washtub as well as a shower. The bedroom was almost as big as the front; she unpacked her inflatable mattress and plugged in the automatic inflation pump.

As she walked back into the kitchen, she was startled to hear the sounds of conversation from outside her door. Had Mark been mistaken? She walked to her front door and took a look out into the hall.

In the landing room, three people sat on the couches under a painting of a striking woman with a white streak through her black curls. A young blonde woman sat on the arm of one couch next to a young man in slacks and a button-down. Across from them, a much taller man in what seemed to be an antique army uniform spoke animatedly. They ignored her entrance entirely.

“Um, hello?” Rose ventured.

Immediately, all three snapped their focus to her, as if she had appeared from nowhere.

“Who on earth are you?” said the tall man.

“I’m Rose. I just moved in. Who are you?”

Surprisingly, this seemed to startle them. It felt eerily like she had entered their home uninvited rather than the reverse.

The blonde sneered at her. “Well, then I suppose we’ll be seeing you around.” Both men looked at the girl, one still seeming surprised, the other questioning. Then they went back to ignoring Rose.

“Excuse me!” Rose said, starting to feel angry. “Who are you? Do you live

here?”

The young man who hadn't spoken yet turned briefly back to her and said, “Vivi let us in.”

“Who is Vivi?”

No answer.

Rose felt increasingly confused and upset, but she decided it wasn't worth it; she was going to put a lock between herself and these intruders. She walked back into her apartment and threw the deadbolt.

She threw herself into unpacking. By the time she had finished with everything that could actually be put away, she felt mostly better.

She turned out the lights and lay down. The cavernous emptiness of the apartment around her did feel a little oppressive in the dark, but that would all be solved once the movers came tomorrow. She rummaged around and found her phone, plugged into the wall next to her mattress, and set it to play her favorite album and then fade to silence. She snuggled into her covers and listened, letting her mind relax.

Her thoughts had just begun to drift into dreams when the bell cut through her awareness.

It was incredibly loud. No, not loud- piercing. She could feel the vibration in her bones. She sat bolt upright in bed, heart pounding.

“What was that?” she muttered, standing up and fumbling for the light switch.

Then it came again. The noise was totally encompassing. She abandoned the search for light and felt her way towards the front door. Whoever was ringing that bell

really had to stop.

Light shone from the cracks around the doorway and from the peephole, but not the bright lights of the landing- moonlight. If they had all gone to bed, who could be making that *sound*?

She put her eye to the peephole and jerked back. It was the girl from the painting, her white-streaked black hair pristine. She was leering up at the hole as if waiting for Rose to see her.

“*Come out,*” she heard in a whisper that rang as violently as the bell. She wanted to back into her room, but she found her hand unlocking the bolt, opening the door.

When Rose stepped out into the moonlight, nothing looked the same. The grand stair with its shining wood, the carpeting and couches, all gone- in its place, a decrepit and burnt-out courtyard gaped before her, railings crumbling with age and smeared with soot. The girl stood before her, no longer pristine herself- her hair was ragged, falling half before her face, and her clothing was faded rags. Her eyes were overbright, but everything else about her seemed shrunken and faded.

In her left hand, she held the ancient mezuzah from the front door, the tiny bell tinkling at her wrist.

“What...?” was all Rose managed, gazing upon this nightmare.

On the other side of the courtyard, a crowd of other figures watched her grimly. They were ragged and bleached as the girl before her. There were about fifteen of them, and, yes, that appeared to be the tall man in uniform, the young man who had

spoken to her, the sneering blonde.

“What,” mocked the girl with the mezuzah, “you don’t remember us?” Her voice echoed strangely.

“Remember you...?” Rose nearly whispered, turning wide-eyed to her.

“Ah, no, you wouldn’t,” the girl spat. “*You* moved on. *You* were reincarnated. While we who burned with the house are trapped because of *you*.”

“W-what do you mean?” Rose stammered, trying to back away and finding her door closed behind her. It felt unstable behind her back, giving as if half-rotten. This couldn’t be happening. This was a dream. She had fallen asleep.

“Well, I haven’t forgotten you. And as you bound us here, I will use you to unbind us now.”

The ghost flung herself at Rose, ringing the bell as she did. That piercing noise sounded, rooting Rose to the spot.

But the girl flew through her, leaving nothing but a shudder. “No!” the ghost shrieked.

Rose hardly dared to move. She inched her way cautiously down the hall encircling the blackened courtyard, hoping to find a stairway down. She had to get away!

But the black-haired girl ran, not towards Rose, but to the crowd of other ghosts. “I need more power!” she cried, ringing the bell again. Rose was transfixed by the effect the bell had on the other ghosts; the girl seemed to absorb them, becoming less worn and more solid as each merged uncannily with her. The others shouted in protest,

knocking the bell from the girl's hands after a few of them had been consumed.

"Vivi, what are you doing?!" cried the blonde.

So this was Vivi. Vivi had let them in. Vivi was a ghost, and she had let the other ghosts into the building.

Vivi turned and floated across the gap between them. Not frozen this time, Rose dodged, tripping and sprawling flat on her back. Vivi flew straight down at her from above, screaming.

But again, Vivi passed through her, vanishing onto, presumably, the floor below. Rose gasped, unsure whether to be relieved.

She heaved herself back up, looking around desperately for an exit. But she found that the ghost crowd had closed in on her.

"I don't know you!" Rose shouted. "I don't know anything about this place!"

"Vivi saw you," said the tall boy in uniform. "We all remember hearing the Warding Bell, but she knows who set fire to our home."

The blonde chimed in. "You Nazi-sympathizing scum." The crowd growled its agreement.

"I'm not a Nazi!" Rose gasped, backing away on hands and knees, getting splinters in her palms. "I'm Jewish!"

"Now, maybe," said the boy in uniform.

"I swear to you," Rose said, "the Nazis are gone. Defeated more than 60 years ago. I have nothing to do with them."

The ghosts seemed, as a whole, unimpressed by this logic. "There are *always*

Nazis. Whatever they call themselves,” the one near her sneered. He moved his hand, and she saw he held the Warding Bell.

“Wait, Eric,” said the other fellow she recognized. “We don’t really know, do we?”

Eric scoffed. “You’ve always been a soft touch, Benjamin.” He rang the bell, and Benjamin, crying out, was dragged into Eric. Eric turned to Rose. “Vivi showed me how to use this, did you know?”

“What...what is it?” Rose said, trying to back away, but finding herself fenced in by ghostly presences, unwilling to touch them on purpose.

“It’s the Warding Bell. It works, you see, like the Golem; instead of the Sh’ma, this mezuzah holds the Word of Binding. When the bell rings, it binds souls. No death, no Gehenna, no Sheol- not even that piddling Christian Hell.”

He leaned down into Rose’s face. When he spoke, his exhalations were cold and smelled of ash. “And so we are *stuck* until the one who bound us is destroyed.”

Quick as cracking ice, he struck out for her throat, but he passed through just as Vivi had. She fumbled up to her feet and fled, now heedless of the spirit crowd.

A rotten section of wood gave out beneath her. Rose dropped hard onto a pile of ashy, tattered cloth that might have once been a bed. She looked up to find the spirits struggling amongst themselves.

But her eyes caught on a movement beside her. Vivi, bedraggled and furious, snarled at her.

“I understand my mistake now,” the ghost hissed. “I cannot touch your body- but I can show your mind what you will not see!” Before Rose could extricate herself from

the moldering bedclothes, Vivi drove her livid face into Rose's.

And she saw. The scene played like a movie. She saw herself take up the bell and bind the residents of this house of Jewish refugees to their home, then toss in a burning lantern.

It was horrifying. She put out a hand instinctively, hoping to wipe it away.

There was resistance. It felt almost like canvas, some fabric that distorted and pulled.

And then it came away, like a flimsy drape. Behind the scene was another. She saw, not herself, but Vivi, younger, listening to her parents talk at dinner.

Her father was saying, "Did you hear about the butcher's shop over on Hanover? They've been asked to start selling kosher meat."

"Tch," said her mother. "It's all those Jews moving in down on University Square. We should never have let them in. Who knows what they're up to!"

"Well, you know what Henry Ford says."

"Mm, yes. Every Jew who moves in is another white person who moves out. Soon, this town will be nothing but filthy foreigners. We should think about saving up to move."

The scene changed; Vivi, now looking about the age she was now, lay on her bed reading avidly about Hitler's search for magical artifacts in a magazine. She turned a page, and then sat straight upright. Rose could see a picture of a mezuzah with a bell on the bottom- presumably, the Warding Bell. Vivi tumbled out of bed, crawled to a corner, and then knocked a baseboard loose. Inside was a tiny tin. She drew the

Warding Bell, decrepit then as now, free of its confines, smiling.

A daytime scene. Vivi sat with the blonde girl, whose name Rose now heard in her mind: Chana. Vivi simpered and grinned, and Chana, seeming enchanted, made cow's eyes at the girl.

"I would do anything for you," Chana said.

"Oh, anything?" Vivi teased.

"Yes."

"Will you take me into your home? It's not really safe here, you know. Anyone could be watching."

Chana hesitated. "Vivi, you know there are good reasons why gentiles don't come in the house."

Vivi pouted and tossed her hair. "I thought you said *anything*, darling. Don't you want to find out what I can give you?" At that last, she drew her face close to Chana's, and Chana went quite breathless.

Once Chana snuck her into the house, the scene began to look familiar; this was what Vivi had shown Rose, distorted. Vivi took the bell from her jacket, binding the spirits of the residents, including Chana. The people all seemed rooted to the spot, as Rose had briefly been before. During the confusion, Vivi grabbed a lit lantern and broke it on the floor, starting the fire. She turned to flee the burning building. But she was too slow; a burning rafter crashed down upon her, trapping her inside with the rest of the condemned.

Rose came back to herself in the ruined building, wiping Vivi aside like the

canvas she had felt in the vision. The ghost girl, dazed, drifted away.

Just then, the Warding Bell itself fell through the hole and onto the ruined bed.

Rose reacted faster than Vivi now; she snatched it up and ran out into the courtyard. She had an idea. "I hope I know what I'm doing," she whispered to herself.

She rang the bell. She felt now that she could shape the sound. She drew all the spirits together before her.

"I had no part in your deaths," Rose shouted. "It was Vivi who bound you, Vivi who threw the torch! I was a convenient excuse for her to consume you all and finally be released from her own trap."

"A likely story," cried Chana, face twisted in fury. "Vivi would never do such a thing."

"I'll prove it," Rose said. She pointed to the wraith and shook the bell, willing the truth to be made plain. "*Speak the truth.*"

Vivi thrashed, unwilling, but then hate crawled onto her features like fog. "Yes, I damned you all!" she snarled. "And I would do it again!"

The ghosts all went still and silent. In the pause, Vivi looked first aghast, and then contemptuous.

Finally, Chana spoke in a wrenching voice, "Even me?"

Vivi laughed haughtily. "Especially you. A Jew and a tribade! A wonderful mark."

The ghosts milled, but it seemed they could do nothing to each other. Not without the bell.

Rose lifted it before her. "I will release you from this prison," she said, more

confident than she felt. Then she dropped the Warding Bell to the floor and brought her heel down upon the decrepit metal. As it snapped, she heard one last chime, and threw her heart behind the tone.

The world seemed to shudder and quake. The wraith that had been Vivi seemed to stream apart, each consumed soul drawn out of her like steam from a boiling kettle. She shrieked and disappeared. The other ghosts streamed away, one by one.

And then Rose was alone, nightgown torn and sooty, her hands bloody and full of splinters, in the bright electric lights of the second-floor landing.