

Aldo

Harrison believes Aldo's Pizza is haunted. "The place, not the pizza. But also I wouldn't eat the pizza." He slices and boxes a deep dish, then washes his hands. He smells like oranges and onions. His forearms are hairless and grey. Alice has no idea how old he is. Twenty, maybe thirty. He has a beard; it is also grey, but only because he dyed it for Halloween. He went as a man in an old photograph he found in his parents' basement. He painted his face white and wore dusty clothing, then sat in a chair at the Halloween party in the exact pose as the man in the photograph for the whole night. Head cocked sideways, like his neck had been snapped. He didn't have fun at this party, he says, but sometimes you're not supposed to have fun. Sometimes you're supposed to make fun for others.

"Haunted?" Alice asks.

“I only noticed after I came back. You have to get away for a while to notice what’s wrong.”

The front door dings. Harrison pretends he didn’t hear it, so Alice walks out to the front counter. She is fifteen. This is her fourth week in the town of Glen Quarry, and her third week at Aldo’s. She opens and closes the store, signs for deliveries, works the register and phone, and makes pizzas. Harrison only makes pizzas.

Aldo’s Pizza is pick-up only. Customers stand in a hallway leading back to the kitchen. The hall has a counter on one side and a window overlooking the creek on the other. A blonde teenaged boy leans against the window and looks out at the water, tapping his fingernails against the glass. His name is Bobby, or Bill. Alice has trouble remembering, which is funny, considering.

“I got your note,” he says. “I spent a lot of time reading it. Smelled nice, too.”

“Thanks,” Alice says.

“I’ve never gotten one of those before,” he says. “A love letter.”

“Neither have I.”

“I don’t want to lead anyone on,” he says. “Is what my sister told me. Not that I’m leading you on. All I’ve done is pick up pizza.”

She takes his pizza off the heating rack and slides it across the counter. A family-sized thin-crust. Sardines, giardiniera, green olives, goat cheese. “Is your mom pregnant?” she asks.

“I hope not.” Without looking he pulls exact change out of his pocket. “My mom is sixty.”

She watches through the window as he hops the stone path across the creek and disappears into the woods, the whole time balancing the pizza box like

a tray of drinks. Alice has written another note under the lid of that box as well. It hadn't been easy. Not much rhymes with giardiniera.

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On Alice's first day, the owner had given her a smooth, metal egg. "Stainless steel soap. It'll help with the smell," he said. "I live two hours north and my son is very sick so I don't come around often. In fact I'm looking to sell, if you know anyone."

"I'm a sophomore in high school," she said.

"Right." He pinched his nose between his eyes, which were too close together. She could almost look at one point in the center of his face as they talked. "Remember to have your parents and teachers sign the work permit and mail it in."

"I don't have any teachers. I'm new. Also my mom is dead," she explained again.

He squinted at her. "Right. Just your dad'll be fine, then." He turned up his coat collar. "The soap helps. There's a lot of turn-around at this place because kids hate how their hands smell. I don't think they're using the soap."

The soap doesn't help. All she gets is an oniony-smelling hunk of metal to go with her onion-smelling hands. Every day she hopes someone will order an extra-basil, but no one eats basil around here. Glen Quarry is a pepperoni-and-onions kind of town.

If she falls asleep with her hands near her face, she has strange dreams. She dreams she is in bed asleep, except starving, her empty stomach rolling over itself. Or maybe it is the person in bed next to her who is starving. Alice thinks the person is her mom, but she can't open her eyes to check. "I'd like an onion. Or salami," says the voice. "I know you have some. I can smell it." It sounds like her mom's voice, but hollow and hungry.

“Pepperoni, not salami,” Alice says. “And those are my hands, not food.”

“Close enough,” the voice sighs.

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Two days before it happened and two weeks before the move, Alice’s mom tried to comfort her. “I’m not worried and you shouldn’t be,” she said. “At this point we know each other so well, you can internalize me. Can’t you? I’ll live in your head.”

“Katherine,” said Alice’s dad.

She stroked a length of Alice’s hair, then gently pulled at it. “Maybe I’m not saying what I mean. I won’t take over your head. I’ll keep to myself. A quiet tenant.”

“I can try,” Alice said.

“That’s not enough,” she said, putting Alice’s hair against her lips.

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“You shouldn’t make pizzas like that for people,” Harrison says when Alice returns to the kitchen. All their orders are in the oven, and he’s using the lull to inspect the bathroom door jamb. “Sick pizzas. There was no counter-balance, ingredient-wise. That’s how the haunting will spread. Most haunted places don’t want to spread; they’re satisfied keeping people out. But a food establishment is a different beast. People ingest the haunting and take it with them. We’ve got to work to contain it. Thusly, I changed some ingredients on that pizza for you. Mozzarella for goat cheese. Black olives for green olives.”

“That’s not what they ordered. They’ll complain.”

“I kept the sardines. Those are pretty standard,” Harrison says. “Added sausage. They’re coming out one ingredient ahead. But if they complain, maybe it’ll be the boy who calls.” He raises his eyebrows at her, then swings the door

open-and-closed. “We need to sand this down. I don’t like how the door hangs open a crack. The porcelain catches the light and when I’m making pizzas it feels like someone’s in there watching me.”

“Is the door part of the haunting?”

“Mostly I think it’s bad craftsmanship.” He swings the door again. It creaks. “Although I don’t remember it being like this before I left.”

“Where’d you go?”

“The Baltics.” He turns on the bathroom light and examines his face in the mirror. “You know much about the Baltics? Cold, salty, and dark. I was living on trains. I had one of those passes and went in circles around the sea. In retrospect I should’ve left the train more. When I finally got off at the airport, I felt like I was still looping, like I was moving on my own particular axis against the grain of the earth. Maybe I brought that imbalance back here with me. Or maybe it followed me there. I don’t know.” He turns on the sink, reaches for the soap, realizes it’s stainless steel, and throws it in the trash. Steam rises from the sink and clings to the mirror. “Selling Aldo’s Pizza is a huge tactical error. It’ll spread the haunting even worse than bad pizza. The owner’s already doomed. He should go down with the ship, not pass it off to some sap. Look what happened to his kid. He wants to inflict that on someone else?”

Alice tries to remember the owner’s name. A girl’s name, she is pretty sure. Stacy, or Ashley. Harrison uses the hand pump on the wall and lathers his beard.

“What was wrong with the kid?” she asks.

Harrison squints and shakes his head. Bits of foam fall to the floor. “The details are fuzzy. But he was coming around here all the time. During the school day or late at night. No one ever heard him come inside. They’d just find him already sitting behind the counter, eating pizza off the heating rack. Once, after

close, they found him in the creek up to his knees, staring at the window.” He bares his teeth in the mirror. “I think the creek is involved. The haunting has spread.”

“Or it was at the creek to begin with,” Alice says. He looks at her. “What I mean is, a creek is part of the natural world. It’s been around for centuries. Aldo’s Pizza started in, what, the eighties?”

Harrison snaps his fingers, but they’re soapy and slip past each other silently. “Good point. Avoid the creek. Avoid anyone who touches the creek. Haunted water probably spreads faster than haunted pizza.” He points at his reflection. “We’ll continue this line of thought later. I have to clean my beard.”

The oven glows in the corner, grinding away as the conveyor belt draws the pizzas through the fire. Heat pushes at Alice’s face, drying out her eyes. An ant crawls across the toppings table toward the green peppers. She smushes it with her thumb. A pang of regret clenches her stomach. She wipes the smear away with a rag and studies the kitchen. The sharp edges and gleaming aluminum are already familiar to her in a way the rest of Glen Quarry is not. The town is small, but scattered within a forest, and the only places she knows how to get to are between here and her house. Even her new, yet-to-be-entirely-unpacked bedroom is a hazy image in her mind’s eye. Aldo’s kitchen is solid, certain, and permanent. It was here before she arrived, and it will be here long after she leaves.

The phone rings. “Whatever it is they want,” Harrison says from the bathroom, “ring it up as a plain cheese. We need to settle down.”

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A man wants to place an order for delivery.

“We don’t do delivery,” Alice says. She thought everyone in town knew this.

“All pizza places do delivery.”

“We don’t have a car.”

“Neither do I,” says the man. Outside, the creek trickles past the stone path in time with the hum of the telephone static. “It’s a small town. You could walk it over.”

“I’m new here,” Alice says. “I don’t know where anything is.”

“I live right across the creek. Right behind the woods. I can practically see you from here.” Harrison peeks his head around the corner, drying his face.

“Can’t you walk over yourself?” she asks.

“It’s safer out here. I don’t like the ambience of your establishment. I get headaches when I go inside. Things look different in there than they do out here, you know. People, mostly. Maybe it’s the lighting.” Alice looks at the fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. “Alas, it’s the only pizza in town,” he says. “It’s not easy, moving so young. You’re much more liable to leave something behind, and then it’s gone forever. You are young, aren’t you? Or is it a trick of the phone?”

Harrison takes the phone from her hand. He holds the mouthpiece in front of his face, looking at it as he talks. “We’re closed for the night,” he says. “Find something to eat in your freezer. A dead cat.” He wipes the phone with his towel and hangs up.

“It’s only six-thirty.”

“Don’t let them toy with you.” He’s washed the grey from his face, and now his beard is dark brown and thick in a way that contrasts with the paleness of his skin and the lightness of his hair, so much so that it looks fake. She pictures him without the beard and thinks he could be younger than twenty, possibly even her age. “There are a lot of people out there, poking their noses in, trying to figure us out.” He pats his belly and grins, black lipstick smeared

across his teeth. “We’re experiencing something they can’t fathom. But if we talk about it, then it’s out there, too.”

The sun sets behind Aldo’s and the creek glimmers with white splashes of reflected moonlight. Alice yawns. “Don’t get sleepy,” Harrison says. “You shouldn’t sleep at work. You get stressful dreams. Do you like music? I picked up some good stuff from a guy on the train in the Baltics. He didn’t speak English but he gave me a thumb drive. Kept me awake for days.” He slips back down the hall.

The heat of the ovens creeps into the hallway. She feels her head nodding. Onion-sweat beads across her neck and back. There’s nowhere to sit in here, she realizes. Not a single chair. She leans her arms on the yellow counter but they slide forward, also slick with sweat. She rests her head in her hands and breathes deeply.

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After the burial, Alice and her dad came home to a house full of people. “No one likes an empty home,” her aunt said.

“It’s not empty,” Alice said. “I still live here.”

“We’ll stay as long as you need,” her aunt said.

And when they couldn’t stay any longer, new relatives rotated in to take their place. The house milled with bodies. The bathroom always full. The bedroom floor littered with cousins who whispered and giggled all night. “I need to sleep,” Alice said, but no one settled.

Then they all gathered on the lawn, watching as Alice and her dad drove away to Glen Quarry. “The plan was to move, anyway,” her dad had said. “We bought it before. A smaller house. Your mother liked the town. She said they had good restaurants.”

Alice looked into the rearview mirror, scanning the crowd for a familiar face, but they were all blurry and far away. Little kids ran off the front lawn and chased the truck down the street, slapping at doors and pushing against the trunk, sending them away.

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The phone rings again.

“I was kidding,” the owner says. “You didn’t have to hang up on me.”

“You were being difficult,” Alice says.

“I was testing you. I finally wrangled my son to sleep and it seemed like the thing to do. You handled it well. Some people let themselves be taken advantage of. Customer service only goes so far. Remember, you’re in control. You have what they want. Heck, they’re willing to give you money for it.”

“I’m going to hang up now.”

“Exactly. There you go. That’s your prerogative.”

Alice hears the speakers in the kitchen crackle to life. A freight train barrels through the sound system, churning and blaring and shaking the walls.

In the kitchen, a pizza has spilled off the end of the conveyor belt onto the floor. Ground beef, pepperoni, green peppers, and spinach.

“I’m stuck,” Harrison calls from behind the bathroom door. “I was trying to fix my beard and the door swung shut. It locked me in.”

“This isn’t music,” Alice says, stepping over the mess. “It’s a train. You listened to train noises while you were on a train.”

“I’ll admit it doesn’t sound as fitting here as it did in the Baltics. I can’t believe it locked me in. I’m on its side. I’m trying to help. Maybe if I were the owner, things would be different. It’d show me some respect.”

“We lost a pizza.”

“Ah, shit. That was an Aldo’s Original. We couldn’t have lost a worse one. She’ll be here any minute to pick it up, too.”

“You call her,” Alice says. “I’m done with the phone.”

“I hate it, too. I always forget who I’m talking to. Or they forget who they’re talking to. We never get anywhere. Anyway we only have her home phone, and she’s already on her way by now. She always walks. We’re not going to have an Original for her, and she’ll be mad.”

Alice hears a little boy sobbing behind the bathroom door. “Are you crying?”

“There’s someone at the counter,” Harrison says. “It’s probably her.”

“I didn’t hear the doorbell ding.”

“At this point you should know it dings when it wants to.” Alice rubs her face, exhausted. The onion scent stings her face. Her eyes water. “Tell her we’re in the weeds back here. And be polite,” he says. “For the love of god, be accommodating.”

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There’s no lady at the counter. It’s the blonde boy again. Ben, or Bruce.

“You gave us the wrong pizza,” he says.

“My co-worker sabotaged it.”

He nods and looks down the hall. “He’s done that before. We’ve been dealing with him for a while. But it’s okay. My mom and sister can’t tell the difference. I think their tastes buds have withered to nothing in old age.” He runs a hand through his tangled hair, which is longer and more unruly than Alice remembers. She thinks she can hear Harrison pounding at the bathroom door, hollering, although maybe it’s the train. Bart, or Brad, smiles at her. “I was wondering if you wanted to take a walk with me.”

“We’re in the weeds back here.”

He twirls a piece of hair around his finger. “Don’t you get a break?” he asks. “It’s so much nicer outside. The wind brings a mist off the creek. It’s very pleasant, and cool.” Alice has never taken a break before. There’s never been a point. He taps out a tune on the counter. “Then you’ve got a lot of time saved up,” he says. “There’ll be no rush to get back.”

She thinks about the pizza on the floor and the woman who will be here any minute. She takes off her apron. Brian, or Brett, jumps up-and-down, pleased.

“Can I ask you something?” Alice says. “It might sound a little weird.”

He smiles again, showing all his teeth. “My name is Basil.”

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Sometimes, in the same way if she left the oven on or the fridge open, Alice is seized with the sense she left her mom at the old house. Alice wishes she had checked the face of every single person on the front lawn on moving day. She wants to call the old house, to see who picks up, but she fights this urge. Lately she’s come to distrust phones. They’re unreliable. Anyone could be on the other end.

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Basil takes her hand and walks her toward the creek. Really he’s only holding her pinkie. He’s much shorter than her, she notices now that they’re outside. She’s embarrassed thinking about those love letters, now.

The night air tastes minty and feels cool against her skin. As they come to the creek, he lets go and hops the stone path. The stones look flat and slippery, covered in a thin layer of moving water.

“This is my creek, you know,” Basil says, putting his hand in the water. “My dad’s, I mean. We used to own all this land, but things got unstable after he died. My mom sold off this patch and took us into the woods. But she says the

creek is mine, in the end. Eventually all of this will be ours again, she says.” He puts his hands in his pockets and shivers. “Are you coming?”

Alice turns back to Aldo’s Pizza. She hears the dull bass of a train engine thrumming in the squat bungalow. To her right, the sole lamp outside of Aldo’s lights the gravel road to the woods. She sees a woman at the end of the road, emerging from the forest. Alice can’t make out her features from the creek, but sees her hair tied up in a bun at the top of her head, a long black dress swishing at her ankles. Alice tries to remember which size the Aldo’s Original pizza was.

“I would’ve liked those love letters even if my mom and sister hadn’t made it so,” Basil says. He’s at the edge of the trees. Alice finds she’s already stepped out onto the stones. Water leaks into her socks. If you had sent them and meant it by your own will,” he says. “I always thought you might have, with time. We’re not different. We have things in common. One thing, at least.” He looks over his shoulder into the woods, then back at Alice. “We have leftovers, if you’re hungry.”

But Alice is sick of pizza, let alone leftover pizza. Even now in the middle of the creek, the smell of onions drifts up from her hands. She wants to rinse them in the water, but it looks thick and black. “You’re too young for me,” she tells Basil, and hops back to shore. She misses a stone and her leg slips into the creek up to her shin, followed by her other leg, but with a leap she’s out of the water and moving down the road. Her shoes squish with every step, the wet soles collecting gravel and mud, weighing her down. The woman on the road stops when she sees Alice running toward her. Alice slows to a walk and waves, trying not to frighten her off. She sees the woman put her hands to her mouth. She isn’t sure why Harrison is so afraid of this woman. If anything, the woman seems afraid of *Alice*.

The woman waves back and a warm wind rolls across the road. Alice yawns. Her legs are heavy. She realizes she's too tired to talk to this woman. She only wants to be home, eat a non-pizza snack, and go to sleep. But now the woman is hurrying toward her, sighing out of the shadows with her arms open, and Alice will have to think of something to say.