

a small nocturnal comedy

The Buck Stops Here

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He met his own eyes in the mirror, which was, he had to admit, the loneliest errand of his evening. Of all the warm and unaware souls in the city — drowsing in their walk-ups, lit blue by the screens they'd fallen asleep against, breathing in the dark — he alone was permitted to see himself. The glass held no one else's witness. It was his face and his audience both, and he stood before it the way a king stands before a kingdom of one.

Tonight, he told the eyes, we are getting milk.

It was a humble ambition, and he wore it so. He had given up the old appetite — the wet, regrettable trade of earlier centuries — and now he kept to gentler things, the way other reformed men keep to seltzer and to walks. Milk. One cup, borrowed from the neighbor across the hall, a man named, he believed, Braxter. He would knock. He would ask. He would be, above all, *normal*.

And here his gaze drifted inward, and the room behind his reflection went soft, and he began — as he always began — to plan.



He would cross the hall and knock, and Braxter would open, and Braxter would say *of course, come in*, and that would be that. Except —

The wall. The old, invisible law. He could not cross a threshold uninvited, and even invited he could not cross it if the inviter held no true claim to the room. This had never troubled him before. In his day, a man's house was a man's house; you charmed the man, the man said *enter*, and the matter was concluded over a fire.

But it was 2026. He kept forgetting that. The age had changed its locks.

Braxter did not own the apartment. Of course Braxter didn't. Nobody owned anything now. Braxter paid his rent through an app, to a property-management company, which answered to an LLC, which was a single tidy line in a real-estate fund, which belonged to investors who had never stood in the building and never would. So whose word would the wall obey? Not a landlord — there were no landlords anymore, no single graspable human with a key on a ring and a face you could lean on. Somewhere at the top of all that paperwork sat a grey and faceless firm in a glass tower in another state, reachable only by a portal and an automated reply, a thing with no throat to charm and no eyes to meet — and yet the one true and final owner of Braxter's modest air. The buck would stop *there*. Permission lived *there*.

So he pictured it. He pictured making the journey to wherever the buck stopped, and finding that he could not charm a corporation, because a corporation has no face to meet your eyes and no door to darken. And so — his mind, in the mirror, grew clever — he pictured making a *second* of himself. A double. A doppelgänger with his face and a better suit, who could survive the hold music, escalate past the chatbot, outlast the transfer and the second transfer, and win — in writing, with a case number — the single word he could never earn for himself.

He could see it so clearly. He smiled at the glass, and the glass, loyally, smiled back.



And then the picture loosened, and he was back one level out, standing at Braxter's door — or imagining he stood there, which in the mirror amounted to the same thing.

The double had done its work. The word was won. Braxter, blissfully, knew nothing — knew nothing of the wall, of the law, of the firm in the far tower. Braxter, one earbud still in, only smiled the smile of the truly unhaunted and said, *Yeah, man, come on in*, and turned, and walked into the dark of the apartment, dissolving the way the living do when they have no idea they are speaking to the dead.

For one moment the two of them stood there together — the Count and his double, the reformed man and the manufactured one, the supplicant and the suit. A small duality, regarding itself. Which of us, he wondered, is the recovering one? Which is just very good at pretending?

He stepped forward to find out. And met the glass.



He was back at the mirror. He had never left it. The hall, the door, the firm, the double, the milk — all of it had spooled out and reeled back in the span of a single held second, and here he was again, nose nearly to the cold silver, looking at the only man he was ever allowed to see.

He studied himself. He squared his shoulders. He thought, with the bottomless and unearned confidence of the truly ancient, that he was, frankly, *magnificent* — a creature of legend, a thing that had outlived empires and locks and laws, a being for whom no wall, no firm, no faceless tower, no Braxter, could pose the slightest obstacle.

Look at me, he thought. I am Dracula. I do not ask. I take.

And he turned from the mirror, and walked, with enormous dignity, straight toward the door —

having forgotten, again, in the warm flood of his own grandeur, the one small thing that two thousand years had never once managed to teach him.

He was a vampire, after all.



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