

The Magician of Sixth Avenue

Σ Samantha Mueller

There are two types of nurses: ones who believe in ghosts, and ones who are lying.

We don't talk about it much, especially now that the war is over. There's not much to say, and no one wants to remember. Most of the time you can feel it more than see it when we're together, this collective haunting, invisible guests at the dinner table. Most of the time we just sit in silence and stare off at a stranger and try to remember where we've seen them before. Was it the operating table? A hospital bed? The morgue?

You do this kind of thing for years and soon enough everyone becomes a ghost of someone, somewhere. Most of the time we don't say anything.

But sometimes we get drunk.

"I swear to God he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen."

The whole table groans. This is Rosie's ghost story. Liza and Ruth and I have heard it a million times. Around us the speakeasy is a whirl of orange and red. Circular tables like the one we're at now crowd the upper portion of the floor, towards the back,

while down below and closer to the stage the dancefloor is a puzzle of bodies. Over everything the familiar bounce of “Charleston” swims in and out of my awareness.

“Rosie, you’ve been nursing for three goddamn years and you haven’t got a single better story?” Liza asks as she takes a sip of her drink. Rosie doesn’t seem to hear her.

“I couldn’t tell you how old he was,” she says, her voice far-away. “It was so strange. He might’ve said 25 or 45 and I would’ve believed him either way. And he had—”

“White blonde hair and crystal blue eyes. Yes. We know.”

Ruth shares a look with Liza.

“And he came staggering down the hall and swooned into your arms and in that second his heart stopped,” Liza says, playing her arm across the table, her voice full of mock-drama. “And you knew there was nothing you could do. He was gone forever.” She closes her eyes, hand to temple, and sighs loudly.

Ruth cackles and I smile into my drink, but Rosie’s gaze has gone unfocused out over the crowd, her glass forgotten in her hand. “His eyes were wide open the whole time,” she says softly. “And the doctor couldn’t find a thing wrong with him. It was so strange. So utterly strange.”

The last time we were all together was three years ago in training at St. Joseph’s. Rosie and I were first years, not even working shifts yet, when Liza and Ruth took us in like the older girls at St. Joseph’s do. They lent us textbooks and notes and answers to old tests and most importantly helped us find the places you could get a drink, if you knocked right.

None of us knew what we were doing there, at least, not really. Liza said she wanted to travel, Ruth was avoiding marriage like the devil himself, and the war had me feeling like I’d go insane if I didn’t do something. Rosie was the only one doing it out of the goodness of her heart. Rosie is probably a saint. We all kind of hate her.

Couldn't tell you why we all ended up together, but now Rosie and I share a room just down the street from St. Joseph's, Ruth got a nice position helping out at a private practice in Brooklyn, and Liza just got back from the front lines.

After the war it was like we all woke up, though none of us knew we were sleeping.

This is Liza's favorite speakeasy and she brought us out tonight because her friend Bobby said there was going to be a spiritualist doing a séance, which is—in Liza's words—just *all* the rage these days. And it was only a thirty minute train ride from St. Joseph's! Ruth already said she was coming along so how could Rosie and I bear to miss it? Wouldn't it be good to have the girls together again? Wouldn't we have such great stories to tell?

So we rode the awful, rattling train all the way to Sixth Avenue, where the tracks soar over the street below and you can see the shops and the dance halls and the stores the magicians peddle their tricks in front of until the owners run them off. I held Rosie's hand until we were no longer travelling at obscene speeds while obscene men leered at me from the corners by the windows, until we were safely back on the ground. I remember when we came here before we graduated, during the war, before all the streets felt haunted and we kept all our ghosts stored carefully behind our eyes. Now we all sit round our little table and wait for someone to fill the silence. It's time for another ghost story. Ruth offers up.

"I'll tell you something strange," she says, and we all lean in. The little orange-shaded lamp on our table makes us all look like jack-o-lanterns.

"There's this gal at the practice. Funny old bird, known the doc for ages. She comes in all the time because she's convinced she's dying of something. There's not a thing wrong with her, obviously, but she pays, so who cares? Anyway, she comes in one day—this was a couple months ago, I guess—and calm as a

summer's day she comes up to the front desk, tells me she doesn't feel so well, then turns around and there's a butcher knife sticking out of her back."

"Bull," Liza says, but she's grinning with gruesome delight.

"Honest!" Ruth insists. "She's dripping blood on the floor and everything. I can't even get her back to the doc before she faints."

"She die?" I ask.

"No, she made a miraculous recovery," Ruth laughs. "Of course she fucking died."

"What'd you think happened?" Rosie breathes. She's come back to reality, though she keeps stealing glances out over the dance floor like she's still looking for someone.

"Beats me," Ruth says, taking a sip of gin and swallowing hard. "Cops said maybe a robber. She was rich."

We all fall silent again and Ruth absent-mindedly swirls her drink in the tumbler. She chuckles to herself, gaze diverting to the table, "She was funny alright. Always asking what a pretty girl like me was doing taking care of dying things. Never quite knew what to say to that." Then she looks up again and gasps.

I follow her gaze over my shoulder to a table behind me where a lonely woman sits. She's wearing black and has shocks of silver in her brown hair. Her hands are cupped around an empty glass. She catches us staring and her face twitches with confusion before we all look away again. Ruth shakes her head, downs the rest of her drink. We all do the same.

Out on the dancefloor the music flares again—"Me and My Shadow"—and Liza's face sparks like a candle, "Oh! Ruth, come on! Come dance with me!"

In a second the two of them are up and off, laughing and stumbling and glittering in their short skirts. They weave through the tables. The way they move between light and shadow makes them flash like lightning bugs, until they take the few steps down

to the dancefloor. For a while I can still spot Liza's tall form as she drags Ruth further in, then all I see is a flash of red hair and purple scarf, then there's nothing. Rosie and I sit in silence.



"He follows me, you know."

Rosie's face is six and a half inches from mine. We've moved to a corner table at the back of the speakeasy and the night isn't as young as it once was. Here shadows drape one side of Rosie's face and the other is illuminated bright orangey-red. Her eyes are wide.

"Just in my dreams at first. That is—I dreamed about him, then I saw him out the window. Then he was there in the room with me. With us. Am I crazy?"

Rosie has naturally curly hair that makes Ruth and Liza moan endlessly with envy. When she talks about something she loves the curls bounce along with her words. Right now she has it carefully waved and slicked down and pinned to one side. She spent a whole hour on it before we left. It does not bounce. Her eyes are wide.

"Tell me what he looks like again," I say, because I've forgotten who we're talking about. She gives me the words. I listen but don't remember.

Ruth and Liza are still out on the dance floor. I can see them over Rosie's shoulder, but I'm not watching them. Instead I'm staring at a boy who looks like one I stitched up last December, a street urchin who didn't have any shoes and cut his foot on a rusty nail. He couldn't have been more than fourteen.

When I sent him back out there in the cold it felt like the wrong thing to do, but I had two others just like him waiting down the hall. He died of infection a few days later. I saw his body on a gurney. This boy in the crowd could be his older brother, his cousin. He catches me staring and smiles, but the

expression makes my stomach turn; all I can picture is a blue body going by on a stretcher. I look away and it's a second before I realize Rosie is talking to me.

"Flo...Flo!"

"Sorry."

She sighs and her eyes dart around the room again. At a table near us is a girl I unsuccessfully treated for scarlet fever. She's sitting with a boy whose broken arm I set in the middle of the night on New Year's Eve. I blink again and it's not them at all. They're laughing, and the music is deafening and I think the gin has gone to my head by now so I focus on Rosie. She says, "I'm scared, Flo. I'm really scared."

The boy and girl get up and head to the dance floor. I come back to myself and shake my head at Rosie who looks at me with her big doe eyes. I take her hands resting on the table and find them shaking, I squeeze tight. Her fingers are cold. "It's nothing," I say.

"But—"

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"He looks so real, Flo."

"He's a ghost," I say. "We know how to deal with ghosts. It's what we do."

Rosie doesn't look convinced.

"Besides, we're under a lot of pressure at St. Joseph's."

"We are."

"Strange things like this happen all the time. Nothing ever comes of it."

"That's true."

"So will you stop worrying and have a drink?"

Finally Rosie's face breaks into a smile. It's small and weak but her round apple cheeks—so carefully powdered with cherry blossom blush—bunch up around her eyes and it's like the sun comes out. "You're right," she says, then takes her tumbler from the table

and downs what's left. She opens her mouth to say something else but the band goes quiet and the dance floor ceases its endless spinning as the dancers start to holler.

Over the sea of heads I see a tall man step out onto the stage. He has silver-blond hair and blue eyes that flicker like projector screens. He's so pale the spotlight makes him look see-through. All of this is offset by his suit, black as pitch and ill-fitting. I can see his bony ankles and wrists. Behind him in the shadows the musicians swan off stage. The singer passes him the mic, then grabs him by the lapel and whispers something close to his ear. He smiles wide and carnivorous, and then she's gone. When he turns back to the crowd his smile gets impossibly wider and he spreads his arms in greeting. The dancers cheer again, some raise their glasses. I see a woman who died in labor holding an empty champagne glass. A man with the same empty eyes of a consumption patient leans on her in drunken comradery. I spot Liza's red hair. Ruth is waving her glass at the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you ever so much for joining me tonight," he says. "My name is Isaiah Barnes, though you might know me better as the Magician of Sixth Avenue. If you permit it, I would like to take you all on a journey."

In the dim light of the speakeasy Isaiah's skin appears soft, flawless; I can't shake the idea that if I reached out to touch it my hand would go right through. He moves smooth, but too quickly. He smiles and I can count his teeth from where I'm sitting. Rosie's grip on my hand seizes suddenly, I look over and she's blanched.

"What's wrong?"

She opens her mouth slightly like a fish, her lips were painted blood-red when we left but the pigment is bleeding on the edges now, berry-colored. "That's," she gasps, "It's—"

"...but before we do that," Isaiah continues, his tone heavy with implication, "a few tricks to dazzle your senses."

And then all the lights go out.
And Rosie screams.



Isaiah Barnes makes fire from his fingers. Isaiah Barnes makes his eyeballs glow and his tongue, too. He turns the lights off and on with a snap of his fingers and when he sings he sounds like an entire orchestra. He pulls a rabbit and two parakeets from his breast pocket. The rabbit runs into the crowd and vanishes. The parakeets fly a few feet and then drop dead in some girl's drink. He brings up pretty men and pretty women who I remember from the morgue and asks them, is this your card? Is this your card? Is this your card?

It always is.

I watch with eyes wide open and try to find the edges of his tricks. Rosie sits beside me in tears. We never seem to run out of gin.

By the time Isaiah turns three of the dancers invisible—their clothes float about the speakeasy and are filled with nothing—I'm enraptured. My eyes are stuck on him and the strange way he moves through the air like he weighs less than a normal person, like he's only half there.

Even as Rosie keeps tugging at my arm and saying in this small, soft voice, "God, Flo I need to get out of here. We have to get out of here now," I don't want to leave. I know the big finale is coming and I do not want to miss it.

"Now," Isaiah exclaims, standing still for a mere second as the whole world stops, "the moment you've all been waiting for." He has long since left the mic behind, but I can still hear his voice ringing throughout the room. "I need everyone to join hands in a circle. Quickly now, it's almost time."

Rosie moans, a low sound, like wind in a well. The dancers do as they're told with their usual raucous laughter; every single one

of them is someone I've seen before. As they circle up I can see the spots where the invisible dancers stand. Ruth is holding hands with one of them, leans close and then laughs at whatever they whispered in her ear.

"Any volunteers want to show us how it's done?" Isaiah asks. The eye-glowing trick was so long ago, but the effects still seem to linger on his face. A freckled arm shoots up. It's Liza.

Isaiah takes her to the center of the circle and asks her some questions to which I cannot hear the answers, but because I know her ghost stories I know what she says anyway.

Who are you trying to speak to tonight?

A boy named Allen Alexander. She met him in the war and they fell in love.

How long has he been dead?

One year, two months, one week and four days.

What was he wearing when it happened?

Just his olive-green military trousers. First course of action with bullet wounds is to strip the affected area. He was wearing his green military trousers, his black boots, and his blood.

Are you ready?

I don't know the answer to that one. I'm not sure if Liza does either. The more she and Isaiah stand next to one another the less real they both look. Isaiah has more shadows than he did before and Liza has lost some of her saturation. There's a shock of white in her hair that I never noticed before but I think it's kind of festive.

She nods.

Then Isaiah has everybody close their eyes, but I keep mine half open. Filtered through my lashes the speakeasy looks like a shadow play and I can pretend the whole thing is a dream. The shadow dancers sway a bit as they wait. And wait. Then Isaiah claps!

Right in front of Liza's face.

She starts to float, just about six and a half inches off the ground. Her eyes have gone blank and she stares up at the ceiling with her mouth open just slightly, just enough for her to breathe, “My god.”

And for a while everything just stays like that. Most of the lights have gone out now and Liza is a picture drawn out in shades of orange and blood. Then from the crowd Ruth shouts, “Me next!”

Now everyone wants to float. Ruth goes through the same process, the same questions. Silence. Swaying. Clap! She floats. Everyone in the circle jostles for their turn and I watch the shadows converge around Isaiah. I turn to Rosie to ask her if he looks familiar but Rosie’s gone. I look back and the crowd is all floating in silence now and Isaiah’s vacant, movie-screen eyes have locked on me across the dead room.

He smiles, and claps.