

Own Creations

by Tyler O'Brien

His narrator stood beyond the closed bedroom door. Ken gripped the inside knob and leaned against the forearm he'd pressed to the plywood, pushing his head on his wrist. It was his own fault the narrator was such a pest. He'd accepted that. But he hadn't made the damn thing show up and move in, and, before all this, he certainly would have disagreed with the critics. Stilted and rushed, painful to read? Please. The prose wasn't that bad. Turned out accurate because a migraine waited beyond the two flimsy pieces of plywood; beyond the threshold to the dim, now seldom used hallway. A walking, talking humanoid migraine.

Pushing himself upright, Ken opened the door, faced his narrator. The doe-eyed creature, nearly faceless with only dull eyes and a mouth, wouldn't move unless told, and when told to act it'd narrate. Teeth chattered in its lipless mouth. Its eyes widened and it grinned. Behind the smile, there was no emotion, like some defective animatronic butler, one nobody had bothered to dress, welcoming guests to a museum of oddities and forgotten trinkets. Light from the bedroom spilled into the hallway, outlining the walls of the L-shaped apartment interior, and highlighted the thing's glossy skin and smooth scalp. Ken motioned his hand for it to step aside.

The creature's voice was breathy, and had an unnatural, forced cadence. "With my left leg I shift myself left. Then my right foot lifts, drops next to it."

Ken groaned. "Hello, Nart."

"I stand, seeing Kenny Horton. He's dark rings under where he sees."

"Kenneth," he corrected.

He crossed the hall to the bathroom and flicked the lock. As well as anyone, he knew storytellers weren't shy. A presence emanated from the other side of the door, tickling his brain like a battery pressed to his tongue. Nart always waited behind doors the way puppies do, at first idle, growing restless and more annoying the longer it's ignored. Had the thing been equipped with the plumbing, Ken was sure it would have left puddles of piss throughout his apartment. That would've made the smell much worse.

Birds hopped along grass outside the bathroom window. They crunched dry leaves and sang to each other. Kenneth wiped smudges from the glass, watching the small critters flutter and

dance. *Should start my bird research soon. My next chapter has a bird expert*, he thought and focused on his work until he forgot about the singing birds. There was always the moment of peace, during what he called the Twilight Minute, when he first entered an empty room. Used to be he thought best in the shower. Now, he thought in quiet twilight.

Expert's a birdwatcher. I should look up pictures of birds so I can describe them.

Ken slid his hand down the hinged barrier, next to the window, running his fingertips over its contours and imperfections, feeling the tingle of Nart's presence. They'd become one of his most treasured possessions. For the first day of living with that thing he hadn't shut his bedroom door. One day was enough to not want it around, so he'd been snapping shut all his locks from then on. Had it watched him sleep like some sort of Kenwatcher? What would a narrator do when there's no one to listen? *How much narration could a narrator narrate if a narrator could narrate narration?* Ken smiled, and the sun set on his twilight as Nart bellowed a story.

"On the evening of that day we lived in an apartment that looked across the city. In the dumpsters of the alley there were rodents and the garbage, wet and cooked in the sun, smelled foul and wafted from the alley through our windows. Drug dealers sneaked down the damp path and the rodents they frightened scampered away—"

Ken thrust the door open. "No they didn't and you stole that from Hemingway! Shut the fuck up!" He slammed it shut, the sticky note sticking to it flopped up, settled back down. Then he silently mouthed: "Shit!" His fingers ran over the note. He'd placed one on the back of the door, on the back of all the doors, reading: Shh! Ignore it. Noise upsets neighbours.

I'm going to get an earful again. Ken shook his head, walked through the bathroom.

After finishing, Kenneth stopped at the mirror. He looked himself up and down, and it hit him like a lightning bolt. Like a car, an *electric* car, a sudden jolt to his nervous system: he could stop it. *A narrator could narrate narration?* Lingering tingles crept down his spine.

He dashed to the door, opened it and pulled Nart through and over to the mirror in one smooth motion. Ken smacked Nart's back, pushed it up close to its reflection so it could see its own not-quite-a-face. It stared at itself, mouth gaping, ready to narrate. Its hands inched to the mirror.

“I see my nondescript self and try to reach to touch myself. My hands are heavy, slowly slowing. I see myself see my nondescript self and see myself try to reach to touch myself. I see my hands are heavy, slowly slowing slowly. I see myself see myself see myself—”

Kenneth left the bathroom, quietly shut the door. For the first time in a week, the narrow hallway was peaceful. Nart-free. The hallway ran another seven feet down to a window. Maybe he'd look out of it later. He nodded then returned to the cramped corner of his bedroom where his study was.

He had a lamp. Quotes from famous authors were scribbled on the wall behind his desk. Next to his keyboard was a signed Faulkner novel. Signed by Frank, not Faulkner. He didn't know who Frank was or why he'd signed a classic, but that's why the book was so cheap, he imagined, and he cherished it and one day he would even read it. Today he would work.

Now sitting, he placed his hands on the keyboard. Ideas flowed and he smiled at the good ones. In his mind, he reached up, plucking fragments of thoughts, rearranging them like colourful rorschachs, living, breathing in his imagination, and he molded them into fantastic shapes and landscapes and impossible structures. Powerful waterfalls spanned the horizons. When he wished, they defied gravity, or flowed in two directions at once. Then evergreen trees and lovely scents of nature. He rhythmically rocked himself until his mind's eye had a clear and unencumbered view of the scene. He stopped and began to write.

Loud banging interrupted him. Someone beat the front door just as Nart had done one week prior. Ken struck his desk, jumped to his feet. His chair toppled behind him and crashed to the floor. He cursed then charged out of his study.

A woman hollered from the stairwell. Ken froze, one foot outside the bedroom. He peered up the hallway, eyeing the rattling knob at the front door. Across the hall the bathroom was still secure and Nart was still rambling. The woman's voice was familiar; Kenneth had written her when he was fifteen. Two beige balloons bounced and flopped in his head as she struck the door. He imagined she was really putting her weight into it. Big Bertha pounded again and again, the wooden framing sounding as though it would splinter at any moment. He pushed his juvenile imagery from his mind and gritted his teeth, bashing his fist against the wall. Drywall cracked and powdered the hardwood floor.

The noise stopped. Ken tilted his head, listened, but there was nothing. He crept to the front entrance, pressed his ear against the plywood. For a moment, he thought he felt the familiar tingle. But there was nothing, and all the better for it. He wasn't about to let another one of those things into his home.

Kenneth turned, returning to his study. Bertha was behind him. He squealed, jumping back into the door. His shoulder cracked against and dented the wood.

"I say," she said. "You keep this"—she motioned to herself, head to toe—"waiting?"

Ken rubbed his shoulder. "Christ."

"My word."

"How did you get in here?!"

"It was open."

He glanced back, doubting his own sanity, yelled: "No it wasn't!" Then he winced and clasped his hand over his mouth. "No," he said.

"Oh." She tipped her finger at him, winking.

"Oh?"

She cocked her head, raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"Just oh?"

Bertha smiled and nodded.

Ken stared, furrowing his brow. She walked around the apartment, inspecting, judging: his too-small TV wasn't clean, there were smudges on the screen; his far-too-ugly couch had holes, a tear, and was missing a leg; his counters were dusty; and no separate room for the kitchen? How quaint. Pinching her nose, she suggested Ken had been using air freshener made from dog droppings. She stopped at the pictures of Ken and his mother, giggled.

"Sparkly clean," she said, holding up a picture. "Nice touch."

Ken grimaced. "Put it back."

She pretended to drop it, laughing, before returning the photo to the shelf. Kenneth didn't laugh.

Someone knocked on the front door.

Ken spun around and swung it open. He growled, "What now?"

The superintendent greeted Ken, head tilted forward, leering up at him.

“Oh.”

He was carrying a clipboard with many papers clipped to it, and an envelope bulged from his breast pocket. “Mr. Kenneth Horton?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve gotten noise complaints.” He lifted a paper on his clipboard. “Three. And just now I heard you bangin’ around when I was walkin’ up here.”

“I was moving furniture.”

“I see,” the superintendent said, tugging the envelope from his pocket. “For you. It’s an official warning.” The way he said the word: *official*; it wasn’t an emphasis, but the word meant something to the man, something Ken recognized.

Ken took the official notice, pocketed it, then froze. It’d hit him. Bertha was still meandering behind him in clear view, her heels clapping along the floor. *I didn’t pay her to be here*. Ken looked at the man. He was looking over Ken’s shoulder.

The man grunted, shaking his head. “Best you just keep the noise low.” He turned around to leave, stopped. Ken heard him sniffing the air. “That’s foul.” He spun back.

Ken closed the door on himself, sandwiching his body between the frame and the door. “What’s the problem?”

“Your domicile has a rank odour.” He wrote something on his clipboard.

“I spilled garbage.”

“You were movin’ garbage?”

“I was moving furniture and then spilled the garbage.”

The superintendent crossed his arms and rapped his fingers on his clipboard. “Son, I do believe you’re speakin’ from your ass. Property renters are *required* to maintain certain standards of quality in their home so as to not bother other tenants. Your home cannot smell like a pit. Won’t do.”

Ken squinted, nodded. He was about to speak, but noticed something about his inflection. “Are you from Chestborough County?”

“Well, yes”—

Ken spoke at the same time as him: “unfortunately.” He snapped his fingers, pointed at the superintendent. “Peter Warren?”

“Have we met?” Pete asked.

“Nope.”

Ken shut the door. He felt the tingle rush away, disappeared, like garbage down a chute. *Feeble old bat*, Kenneth thought, taking the envelope from his pocket. His fist clenched when he read its contents. The superintendent had lied. It wasn’t a warning; it was an eviction notice. There were noise complaints, true enough, but he hadn’t done anything to be evicted for. Unless the smell really was that bad. *I wrote him. It’s not real.* The superintendent’s behaviour had a striking resemblance to the Peter Warren he’d written, but he hadn’t yet written physical descriptions, so was that him? Ken opened the door a crack, peeked through. Now he was gone. He shut the door. Had he met the superintendent before? Was that him?

I wrote him. It’s not real.

But his name had been the same. The stairwell was empty, Peter Warren was gone, but Ken still had the notice. If Pete was gone why did his prop remain? It felt real. Looked real. Was he really being evicted?