

PARTY ANIMALS

BY LARA ATALLA

She glared through the blinds, parted just enough to see across the street. They had this party annually since moving in three years ago, and she detested it more each time. Their ridiculous costumes and decorations infuriated her. Their noise disturbed the serenity that had long been her only comfort. She had lived here since childhood. She understood the joys and pains that this soil had carried. She had loved the people whose souls now wandered among the dwindling orchards. Each new building eclipsed a piece of her, each tree removed was agony. The soil and souls hurt too. She felt it.

A few days ago, he trotted across the street as she returned from her walk. "Another year, another Halloween party, eh Madame Findley?"

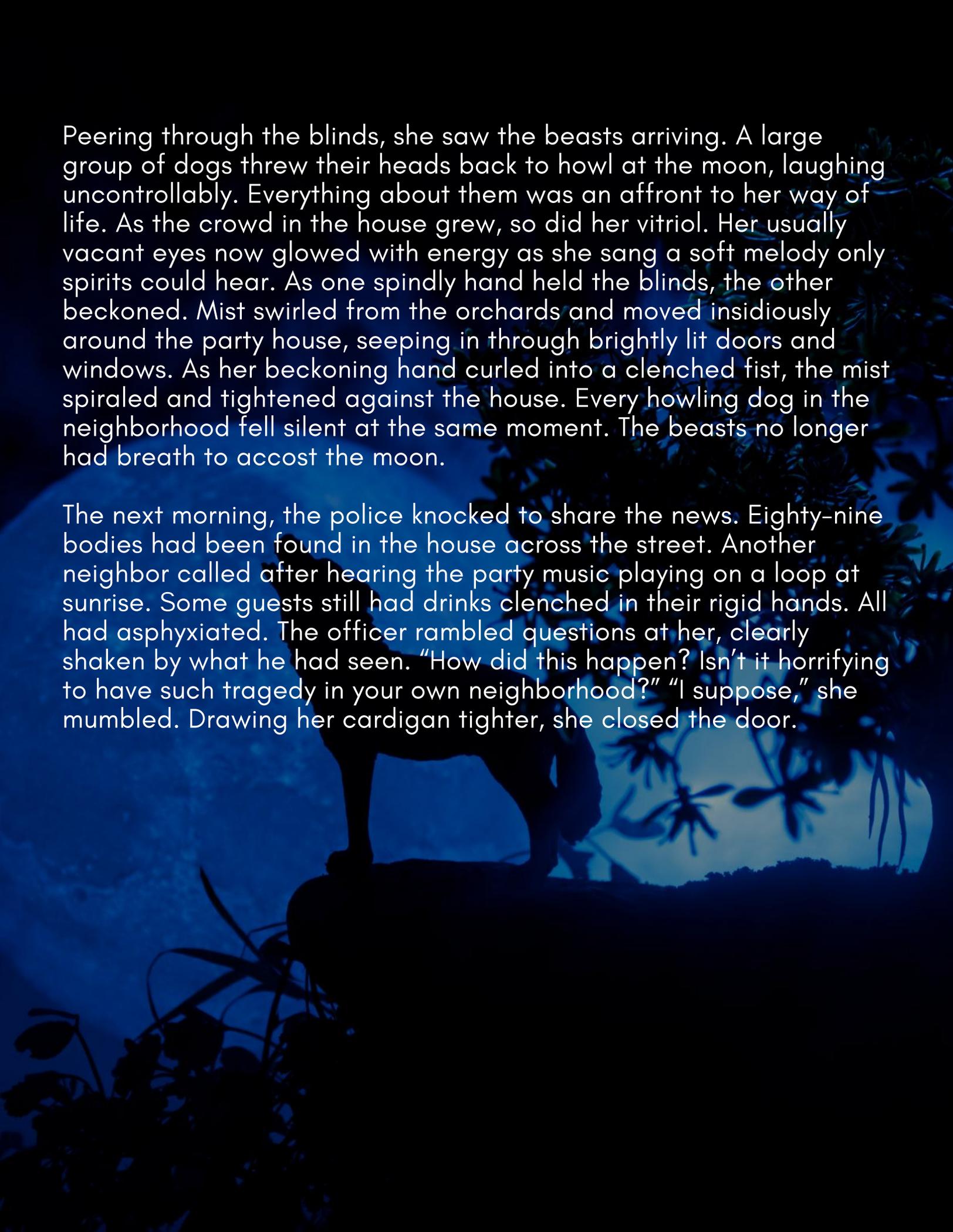
She abhorred how he called her "Madame." His misplaced attempt at being endearing proved that he knew nothing about her.

"Look, I wish you'd join us this year. You know, time to meet your new neighbors and everything. We're pretty nice if you give us a chance."

"I suppose," she mumbled in reply. He viewed this ritual as the sacrifice required to host his party. Once each year he had to make conversation with her while the skin on the back of his neck crawled. Her vacant eyes would haunt him for the next few days, but he always dutifully completed the ritual.

"The theme this year is animals, so you'll see lots of creatures around here in a few days." He chuckled nervously.

"I suppose," she mumbled again, drawing her cardigan closer against her frail body. She briskly turned toward her house, leaving him standing awkwardly on the sidewalk, skin still crawling.

The background is a dark blue gradient. In the center, there is a silhouette of a dog standing on a rock. To the right, there are silhouettes of palm trees. In the bottom left corner, there are silhouettes of various plants and leaves.

Peering through the blinds, she saw the beasts arriving. A large group of dogs threw their heads back to howl at the moon, laughing uncontrollably. Everything about them was an affront to her way of life. As the crowd in the house grew, so did her vitriol. Her usually vacant eyes now glowed with energy as she sang a soft melody only spirits could hear. As one spindly hand held the blinds, the other beckoned. Mist swirled from the orchards and moved insidiously around the party house, seeping in through brightly lit doors and windows. As her beckoning hand curled into a clenched fist, the mist spiraled and tightened against the house. Every howling dog in the neighborhood fell silent at the same moment. The beasts no longer had breath to accost the moon.

The next morning, the police knocked to share the news. Eighty-nine bodies had been found in the house across the street. Another neighbor called after hearing the party music playing on a loop at sunrise. Some guests still had drinks clenched in their rigid hands. All had asphyxiated. The officer rambled questions at her, clearly shaken by what he had seen. "How did this happen? Isn't it horrifying to have such tragedy in your own neighborhood?" "I suppose," she mumbled. Drawing her cardigan tighter, she closed the door.