

Basement
by Eric Cecil

The man in the basement waits in the shadow at the end of the room. I pile boxes in the corner opposite. I try not to look at him, but still I sneak peripheral glances: spot the pointed toe of a worn boot, a tattered pantleg spackled with dark paint, a shock of coal or muttbrown or pearlwhite hair. I try to cobble these images together into a composite man, but it's no use. I can't see him.

And you never will, he says. Not like that. There's a tremor of movement behind me, the snarl of grit under busy heels. I ignore it and heft one box onto another, then look toward a recess in a far wall, where I notice daylight fighting against a deepset window. Someone has tarred it, blackened it, and it's impossible to see through the gristled brushstrokes to the street outside. Where the legs of pedestrians and wheelwells of vehicles should show, there are only vague shapes. Nothing else.

Nothing to see out there anyway, the man says. I bend and lift another box as he instructs me, in a voice low and hoarse, to ignore the windows and tend to my work in the basement instead. He wheezes, coughs. I turn toward a pile of old coats, looking beyond them to the interminable darkness. You sound like a smoker, I say. I tell him that I used to smoke, too, chaining cigarettes together like firecrackers at a desk I stole from a furniture store, whiling away hours I snatched from its timeclock. I spent hours at that desk, I explain to the man in the corner, days fuming, draining cans, staring into corners piled with my junk, my stuff. And only now have I thought to move it to this basement.

Moving it won't help, he says.

I frown and push a fist to my mouth, clear my throat. Then why am I down here?

You're not, he says. You're not down here at all. He coughs again. I look toward the vague outline of the stairway. He darts into a new and near shadow, and I catch the bend of a bare elbow, the fold of a lip curling over cracked incisors. They gnarl into a grimace lost. The yellowed dew of an eye meets the faint light of the window, then disappears, folding back into the vagary. His voice deepens. You're nowhere, he says, settling into the cowl of his silhouette. You're no more here than you are there, back at your desk. Back at your cigarettes and cans and timeclocks.

I tell him that I am there, in the basement, that I'm moving my belongings. He ignores this and continues: Maybe in the minds of others. Despite their best efforts to erase you, he says, you persist.

I don't know what you mean, I tell him. He disregards this. In their memories, he continues. And before I can ask whose memories, he tells me: Friends, he begins. Family, classmates, coworkers. Girlfriends.

We had some good times.

Good times. The man draws out the phrase in mock appreciation. They'd just as soon forget those good times, he says. But they can't. They carry you like you carry those boxes. And moving you to their basement, he says, does them no good.

The light dims in the window. I try to look through it again, watching the sun cherry the black paint that mars its surface. Then I surrender the idea altogether and focus, instead, on the interior of the basement. There's another vague sound somewhere ahead and to the left: something like the growl of a drain. I tilt my head to the obscure ceiling, catch the limed scent of mold, back away from the window.

If you're right, I say, if I'm not here, then where am I?

He's silent. I call to him again, shouting this time: Where? I step forward, drifting toward the purlieu of the voice, the area where it once was, and run headlong into another cardboard box. I feel it canter, topple, fall to the floor, hear the thunderclap and rustle of its collapse. The scant light from the distant window outlines its form. Assorted contents spill from its loose flaps. Old pictures flash their timeless gloss, and pins and paperclips, straightened or bent into grotesque shapes, twist in arcane piles. I bound over the mess and charge into the corner, deeper into the black, my arms outstretched, searching. I'm ready to seize the man in the basement, to demand answers.

But I can't. He's gone. So is the corner. Instead, I find more boxes. They form faint and precarious columns, and these throng into the serried walls of a corridor. It winds deeper into the basement, where I am not, have never been, will never be.