

Lord of Land

By Barlow Crassmont

Mr Yonapoll's knock had a singular quality I associated with an ominous occurrence in nature. Spontaneous but cumbersome, it would gradually turn melodious if one was extensively subjected to its obnoxious repetition. The longer the ears rejected the clamour, the more submissive they became. But taken in small doses, it was as reassuring as an earthquake or a flash flood. Enough to make your heart rate escalate.

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When I first moved to Credere Residences on the near north side, leaves were still falling, and rainy days outnumbered dry ones. Underestimating the forecasted storm's ferocity, I took a train and two buses, struggling to stay dry between each. At length, I reached the address from the ad (*Affordable studios and one-bedroom units*) and, soaked and dripping, found myself in front of the grotesque building. It stood as a structure from a forgotten past, dwarfed by clouds so dark and angry it was difficult to picture it without them.

It was as wide as it was tall, its color perpetually hovering between light black and dark gray. I marveled at its pointy roof and acute edges, and imagined them scratching the sky in a



fantastical flight of whimsy. The windows were dull but emanated enough luminosity to resemble rectangular eyes of malicious intent. With a gargoyle on each end of its facade, the building appeared a product of Victorian fiction. How did it survive for so long, in this remote part of town, its design unphased by modernity? Today, such architecture one could find only among the houses of worship, for all to admire and behold, not hidden away and concealed from the

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majority.

When lightning diverted my attention ever higher, the ensuing thunder boomed instantly. My ears rang, knees buckled, and in my desperation I grabbed the metal fence. That's when he appeared, his thick hair dry under an umbrella, his eyes blacker than ink.

"You shouldn't touch metal during a storm," he said with an accent. "It's an electrical conductor. Lightning strikes this fence, it'll be the end of you."

"Yeah, but what are the odds of that?" I said. "Are you Mr Yonapoll?" He nodded. "I called about the studio." I showed him the ad, but he barely glanced at it, instead motioning for me to follow. He opened the gate adjacent to the building and we descended a few steps. We walked down a long corridor that smelled of dust and garbage. Dark blotches were embedded on the cement, like unwashable stains the rain had given up on. A door forgotten by time—carved and poked by sharp objects, and rust on every hinge—came up on our right, and Yonapoll paused next to it. He fumbled a large ring on which two dozen keys hung, and riffled through them like a cumbersome deck of cards. When the right key clinked inside the latch, the door swung

with the ungracefulness of a dust storm.

The interior seemed to invite darkness rather than light. Yonapoll flipped the switch several times, but no light came on. As he walked over to the window to open the curtains, a greyness conquered the space. The room had a narrow kitchen, small fridge, only a single stove top. No oven. The bathroom had a shower consisting of a floor with a drainage pipe, and a toilet one couldn't sit on without their knees getting in the door's path. Bleak, small, claustrophobic, depressing. But alas, it was all I could afford.

"It's three-fifty?" I said.

He looked me over once more, then shrugged. "You are alone? No wife? Girlfriend?"

"Just me."

"Ok, I can make it three-twenty-five, but no less."

"Thank you," I said, hiding my half frown. "I like it. It's just . . . it's small."

"I have a bigger one, but it's more expensive," he said.

"How much? My budget is—"

"See it first, then we'll talk about price. Come."

We climbed three floors up and maneuvered through labyrinthine hallways that extended

further in every direction than the building's exterior dimensions would suggest. Soon I forgot which way we came in, in what direction the ocean lay, and how I'd possibly find the exit unaided. I struggled to keep up with the old man. He moved like a gazelle, unphased by altitude or distance. My heavy breathing was the sole ambience when we reached the door of the unit. It was new, shiny to a fault, number nine embedded on it like prestigious artwork. The lock turned as if underwater, its mechanism making not a sound. Textures of life and hope radiated from the plush couch, and the sight of the vast courtyard made me feel like an emperor. I walked without speaking, touching the walls, stroking the furniture, and marveling at the fine window frames.

"It's wonderful," I said. "But if it's more than three-fifty—"

"Three-fifty it shall be," he said. "Just for you. Don't tell anyone."

"Really?" Yet my skepticism wouldn't allow me to continue unimpeded. "Apartments like this go for five times that just north of Uptown."

"We know how difficult housing is these days, and we pride ourselves in providing a cheaper alternative."

"Is that sustainable in today's market?"

"We get by," he said. "Be aware, at this price, these apartments go like hotcakes. So if—"

"I'll take it," I said, shaking his hand more forcefully than he may have liked. "Where do I sign?"

While he went to get the contract, I meandered about the place. The walls were recently painted, the VOC smell lingering still. Sink and tub appeared relatively new—if not brand new—certainly new enough. The taps turned smoothly, and hot water emerged after a few seconds. I had just finished washing my hands when Yonapoll appeared holding the many-paged form with too-small print.

"What can all that possibly say?" I said. Truth be told, I wanted to spend precious time reading it like I wanted a colonoscopy.

"The usual," he replied. "Rent's due on the fifth of every month. Late penalties are twenty per day. Security deposit upfront, first month, and last."

"Is that all? There's a lot here." The more I glanced at the paragraphs, the more they resembled the vernacular of the medieval British monarchs. Several *thuses*, plenty of *thous*, and I don't know how many *shalls* and what-have-yous.

"Legal jargon. You're welcome to read it, but two interested parties called minutes ago. They're heading this way as we speak. If they sign before you . . ."

His persuasive skills and my severe desperation were a potent combination. I could no more resist either without jitteriness overwhelming me.

"It's three-fifty, right?" I said. If not, I'd be on the street soon enough. The weight of unpaid bills and student debt was already coiling around my neck like a boa constrictor.

“Yes, three-fifty. Cheapest there is and that ever will be.”

I signed without a second glance, tenant’s rights and duties be damned, with a muted screw it under my breath. I caught a smirk on Yonapoll’s face. His eyes narrowed slightly, and from that moment, he became more relaxed, subdued, and rarely scampered about as he had before, when I was a potential tenant, and not an official resident of his units.

The next day, I paid him the necessary sums. I didn’t have much stuff, and the place was already half-furnished. Stacks of boxes crowded my living room, and when the movers’ trolley dropped off the last one, its departure brought on a sigh of relief I’d been savoring for days. I finally had a place of my own—*my own, no roommates!* That it cost half as much as a similarly sized two-bedroom I previously shared with two others was all the more satisfying.

Before the weekend had concluded, I watched the raindrops from the comfort of my top floor unit. Unworried, and with a load off my mind, I slept better than I had in weeks, and met the commencement of the workweek with an unusual pep in my step.

It wasn’t until the fourth night that I heard a strange hymn emanating from the lower floors. The music and the accompanied chant mingled with my half-waking state after I had dozed off on the couch. Outside, the fading light resembled either dawn or dusk, and made me question the day of the week. Concluding the chant to be a

product of my dormancy, I turned over and resumed my sleep, thinking no more of it that night.

Gradually, I made acquaintances with a neighbor. Romero, an immigrant who toiled at the carwash next to the highway, lived three doors down the hall with his cousin Jorge and a friend, Salinas. Romero was a friendly fellow, perpetually smiling under his thick mustache, despite toiling from sunup to sundown like an ox. I helped him carry his groceries from his car, and his cordiality was such that he invited me over for dinner before he even knew my name.

“Where I come from, neighbors are family,” he assured me. “And family breaks bread together.”

The following week, Romero’s place sizzled with grilled pork and beef, striped peppers, onions, rice and beans. His roommates and I swayed harmoniously while downing tequila shots as 80s music resonated from the Bluetooth speakers. Each of my trips to the toilet was a wobbly walk that made me regret the alcohol, yet embrace it nevertheless on the way back to the table. But after the fifth one, my hand politely declined the sixth. Which was just as well, for what they told me thereafter, no tenant should hear under the influence. At first, I chalked up Romero’s question to my drunken ears playing tricks on me as the room moved, while I remained still as a stone.

“I’m not sure what you mean.” My words were slurred and emitted laboriously.

His response was gibberish, sprinkled with few words I could comprehend. Not wanting to appear completely out of it, I persisted in clearing up the confusion.

“What . . . I mean, when?”

“Every two months. He’ll be coming to you next, probably.”

Ok, I was tipsy. Shit-faced. Bashed, even. But I’ve never been so plastered that I heard that which was not said. What in the world was he on about?

“I signed a one-year lease until next spring,” I said. “He . . . can’t . . . right?”

“He can,” Romero said. “Did you read the contract thoroughly?” I shook my head, this time consciously. “Neither did we. Imagine our surprise.” He poured himself another shot, and the last memory I have of the night was the liquid dripping down his chin and pouring onto his lap, and the savory mezcal enveloping me like a transparent blanket.

I woke up on my couch just before dawn (I really need to start making the extra effort and reach the bed before passing out). The day was gray and somber. As I wiped my drool off the cushion, I heard the sinister knock for the first time. It was overly loud, monotonous, and as graceful as an alarm meant to ache instead of wake. Before I opened the door, I could hear Yonapoll’s raspy breath invade my personal space before his eyes did.

“Morning,” I said, my head spinning every which way.

“Starting tomorrow,” he said. “Rent’s gonna be four hundred.”

“Four . . . wait, what?” My smile suggested his words were but a jest; yet his sober countenance wanted no part of it. “I signed a contract for three-fifty,” I said. “You can’t just raise it . . .”

“I can, if the contract stipulates so. And it does. You should’ve read it. Good day.” He turned and walked away.

The ensuing solitude allowed me to nurse the hangover in silence, without his growling voice uttering untruths that felt like sandpaper on raw flesh. Finding the signed lease contract became my only objective, and with a dry mouth and an aching headache, I stumbled about, searching through various drawers filled with dust and plastic bags and loose nails and screws, until I found the sheet under old light bulbs I should’ve thrown out instead of stacking them with items of relevance. My hands were stained with grit and granules as I flipped through the pages, fumbling through text so small it required magnifying glass to properly comprehend. After forty minutes of squinting my eyes into temporary long-distance blindness, I found the necessary stipulation.

It lay under the description of terms section 2, part 3, article 14: *The Landlord (Party A) reserves the right to increase the lease amount whenever he or she feels, and the Tenant (Party B) must comply. If the Tenant should refuse to pay the additional difference, they will be subject to violating the contract, and necessary legal action will be taken against them.*

My heart leapt all the way to my throat, and a

newfound sickness overwhelmed my ailing stomach (this time unaided by alcohol). I felt foolish and naive, and no amount of hands or fingers on my face could properly cover the shame. How could I have fallen for this, and not looked at the contract carefully? And how could Yonapoll succumb to such treacherous methods of rushing the tenants to sign in haste, only to enslave them to additional costs and expenses, without them being aware? What possible law could support this deceit?

I wanted to tear up the contract, to burn it in my bathtub, and not lay eyes upon its fraudulent kind again. But soon I realised that inspecting it for further discrepancies would be of more use. What if he raised it again before the year's end, and by twice as much? Was there a limit to his maliciousness, or could he go as high as he wanted, without a second thought?

I folded the document and shoved it back into the same dusty drawer, and, in carelessness to close it quickly and with a dose of anger, pinched my forefinger in the crevice, causing me to wail in a most unseemly manner.

When the weekend arrived, the hymn from the basement became more frequent, its timbre echoing down the hallways when the sun beamed through the western windows. For the briefest of moments, I saw Penelope Rhowford from Unit 403 cross the hallway and descend the stairs as I was ascending. Her absentminded countenance made her appear distracted and busy, and by the

time I entered my unit, she let the hymn reverberate louder upon her entrance to the basement. Only when the door slammed did the harmony turn dreadful and heavy.

I was curious to find what exactly went down there, but without a familiar face to assist me, I decided to let the matter rest for another time. Luckily, that took place less than forty hours later, when the sight of Romero and his cousin Jorge brightened my day. They, however, did not appear nearly as jubilant. They let my greeting hand hang for too long, and I tried to play down the mild embarrassment.

“Now that I think about it, I didn't thoroughly wash it after my last bathroom visit,” I joked. “You were right not to shake it. You were also right about Yonapoll. My rent's four hundred now.”

“Ours is six-fifty,” Romero said. There was little color in his face, and his hair was disheveled and unkempt.

“Holy shit!” I wanted to say more, but nothing came to mind. “How . . . ? Why?”

Jorge spoke little English, but when they both shrugged simultaneously, I knew he could at least understand that much.

“We'll have to join the group . . .” Romero began. He struggled to find words, and soon was looking over both shoulders. In a flash, their departure seemed to consume the hallway's light, for I found myself moving about intuitively rather than by vision. An aura of incense that recalled rotten carcasses consumed the

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atmosphere—both in smell and appearance—and I coughed extensively to prevent a full-on gagging. As to its origin, I could only guess, but my hunch was that it originated from a below door yet unseen, only heard and sensed by the hair on one’s arms.

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Not even a third of the year came and went, and my life at Credere Residence took another turn. The knocking came again, heavy and grievous, and with it the sight of those big black eyes.

“Rent’s gone up again,” he said. “Seven hundred. Due tomorrow.”

The time of queries and questions and interrogations was past. I could only chuckle, shake my head, and exhale a deep sigh before speaking.

“I cannot afford that, unless I want to starve and endure a winter without heat.”

“That will be a problem,” he said. “Unless . . .”

“Unless?”

“If you join our prayer group, we will consider giving you a discount. All faithful members are taken care of. We meet once a week.”

“You mean, the noises from the basement? That’s prayer?” I said.

He nodded. Surely this was some twisted jest, meant to insult and shame, and leave the butt of the joke beaten and battered.

“What kind of discount?” I asked.

“A considerable one. Some members’ leases are completely comped.”

There it was. I had to commit to a church choir in order to save money. This was all a ruse, a swindle of the highest order. Complying with his demands would serve only to increase their membership, and encourage them to deceive others the way I have been.

“What religion do you practice?” I asked. “I’m not much for worship.”

“Ours is an old faith,” he said. “Its revival is inevitable, and we’re leading the way. The best way to get an idea is to attend our sermon this Friday.”

Did I really want to get involved with a bunch of doctrinal fanatics? Even at the benefit of a reduced lease, to sell out was never my ambition. What kind of person would oppose all things holy, only to succumb to its absurdity after all these years, and primarily for monetary gain? Without principles, I was nothing and nowhere;

in short, a no one.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I am not interested, but thank you for the offer.”

He merely nodded, appearing neither disappointed nor neutral. “Very well. Have the seven hundred ready tomorrow.”

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The next day, upon inspecting my finances more closely, I realised I had forgotten three unpaid bills (camping tent, hiking boots and a car rental from last summer’s trip to Wisconsin) that hung over my head like scorned apparitions. The balance was substantial, more than my bank statement could support, and soon the cold sweat that overwhelmed me was more cumbersome than Yonapoll’s hairy knuckles.

If I was to keep neglecting the existence of debt, the burden of creditors and collectors was bound to drive me into extended sleeplessness which, at length, would turn into a full-on madness. Returning to the original three-fifty lease was the only sensible option. In such a case, the surplus, however minute, would be sufficient to pay off the overdue balance in small increments, even if it took two years. And so, with slumped shoulders and lowered head, I approached Yonapoll as he was sweeping the front stairwell.

“All right,” I said. “What time on Friday?”

The basement door stood as the last divider

between my previous agnosticism and my soon-to-be god-loving zealot. When Yonapoll opened it, it gave view to several benches facing a podium where various candles burned as bright as solar stars. At least two dozen devotees were seated on the banks, facing the podium where a large throne stood, spiky and fearsome, as if forged from the deepest volcanic belly.

A tall pole stretched from the back of the antiquated chair and rose upwards through a small hole in the ceiling, its apex a fantasy for the curious. Soon, a subtle electrical current began to slither on its exterior. I can only imagine its blue sparks reflecting in my wondrous eyes.

A subtle hum was omnipresent, and indiscernible chants resonated from the forward-facing heads. Yonapoll suggested I sit in the back, away from the only illumination, and adjacent to the organ that protruded from the well. A small person, their face obstructed under a cloaked hood, wore a dark-colored robe, and played the keyboard like an oversized clarinet, fondling its large keys rhythmically. The underground abbey was soon filled with a tone so lamentable it induced more shivers than a haunted house.

Someone was seated on the podium’s elevated chair, that much was clear. They were tugged by shadows and enveloped by the prevailing darkness. At first, their definition was indiscernible. Who or what exactly it was, I could only speculate from where I sat.

Then, like escalating whispers, the unified chant began. The language was either ancient or

foreign, its origin a mystery. I understood not a single syllable, yet I played along, and repeated as much as I could pronounce, fumbling every letter and phoneme like it was a wet soap in my hand.

After Yonapoll knelt in front of the stage's throne, he bowed and swayed, muttering incoherently. Within seconds, the thing on the stage stood up, displaying its magnificence. It was eight feet tall and its head was crowned by multiple horns like obsidian blades. Fire burned in the holes where its eyes should have been, and the only sound it emitted was a growl fiercer than a tiger's. When its claw-like fingers motioned for the spectators to rise, they did accordingly. I stood my ground, still in disbelief, wondering if I was awake or passed out on my couch after one of my drinking stupors. The collective group bowed and knelt, rose again, their unified chant gradually making more sense than minutes earlier. I followed their lead and ultimately rose. That's when the thing looked at me.

Most notable were its acute teeth, and the predominantly red-colored flesh underneath its spectacular cape. Gold rings rested on several of its fingers, and when it pointed its monstrous hand at me, my soul leapt out of my chest. The thing meandered about, before finally resting at the foot of the stage: staring, gesticulating, nearly daring. I embraced its hellish form and seductive eyes as I would a tempting vixen.

Within seconds, my soul was at peace, my spirit at rest, and my body moved towards the

electrified pole, as a magnet towards iron. At first, I hesitated to touch it, but Yonapoll assured me of the contrary.

"It's all right," he said. "You're under the Lord's protection. He won't let harm come to his followers." After an extended inner deliberation, I touched the electric pole, and was overwhelmed with a jolt of energy and dynamism that made me shiver all over. When I glanced upwards at the Lord, he was more magnificent than a renaissance painting: amiable in appearance, benevolent in generosity, and more comforting than a loving parent.

He loves me.

I was home, at last.

Image: "[Thann : gargouille / gargoyle 2](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [OliBac](#)