

Every town has a street that, if you drive down it long enough, leads somewhere you've never seen—and probably shouldn't.

Most of the time, that road ends in farmland or a ghost town with more raccoons than residents. Sometimes, if you're unlucky, you'll find a gas station run by a guy who looks like a zombie and smells like expired deli meat microwaved in a sock. But if your luck is very specific—the kind that comes with a warning label—you might find an apartment complex.

Its bricks were probably teal once, but now they're just a patchwork of rust, blackened vines, and bird droppings. A flock of ornery crows circles the roof, so warped by pollution and inbreeding they look like vultures that lost a bet with evolution. They squawk down at you with something that almost sounds like language—if language were being spoken mid-colonoscopy.

And if your eyes drift to the sign out front, you might catch the name in flaking gold letters:

Super A!

Natural Apartments

Yeah, I don't know what the "A" stands for either. Maybe "American." Maybe "Abandon Hope." Still working on it.

If you're the kind of optimist who thinks the inside might be better than the outside, I've got bad news. You're wrong. Dead wrong.

The interior hums with the buzz of fluorescent lights that haven't been updated since the Cold War. The paint on the walls peels like it's trying to escape. The carpet squishes when you step on it and crunches when you lift your foot—like a movie theater floor that's gone soft and sentient. The air smells like foot fungus and fermenting ginger, and your skin prickles like it's trying to warn you: Leave.

And yet, every single apartment is occupied. From the penthouse suite on the top floor to the broom closet in the sub-basement. You should count yourself lucky the tenants don't hang out in the lobby—because if they did, you'd be sprinting for the hills based on looks alone. I'm no beauty queen myself, but some of these folks make me feel like a Calvin Klein model.

If you make it past the entrance—past the cobwebs that look like they've unionized and the mailboxes that haven't seen a letter since JFK was in office—you'll notice a wooden door to your left. It's covered in garlic, religious symbols, and a few things I'm pretty sure are just cursed. In the center, a surprisingly clean plaque reads:

EMPLOYEES ONLY

Behind that door is the only guy who keeps this place from collapsing into a sinkhole of eldritch horror and unpaid rent. He wears denim overalls that make him look like a car mechanic from an '80s musical, complete with mysterious stains and knee patches that have seen things. He might be playing solitaire, fiddling with the TV antenna, or passed out on the squeaky cot that doubles as his bed.

That guy is me. Eli Smith. Formerly the best handyman this side of the Pacific. Then came the incident. I don't talk about it much. Mostly because I signed a lot of paperwork. But let's just say I'm not allowed near aquariums, public fountains, or certain brands of air freshener. The doctors say I'm fine now. Just need to avoid large bodies of water. I asked if the boiler room counts. They weren't sure.

Now I live here. My office is also my apartment—complete with a bathroom, a kitchenette, and a back door that opens into a dimension I try not to think about. There's a clipboard on the wall with yellowing service requests like:

“Fix the screaming in 202 (again)”

“Replace hallway bulb—keeps flickering Morse code”

“Check on 700. Tenant says the sink is clogged with hair.”

It’s not all bad. The lady in 103 gives me food sometimes. I think she’s sweet on me, though the warts make me keep my distance. I don’t know what country she’s from, and I can’t pronounce half the dishes, but they taste okay and I’ve only gotten parasites once. The guy in 408 loves to talk about his travels. He lent me a weird twisted horn thing a while back. I use it as a paperweight. The kids in 609 are adorable, even if they do get a little bitey.

The place is weird as hell. I’ve been yelled at by sewage pipes. I’ve seen mice build a catapult out of toothpicks to wage war on the crows. On Sundays—my only day off—I once saw a tenant stab the wall and the wall bled. My dreams are haunted by entities I can only describe as concepts with teeth. The chanting in the basement never stops.

But hey, it’s a job. It keeps me busy. It keeps me fed. And it keeps me entertained. Every now and then, I sit down and type some of this stuff up. Helps me reflect. Helps me stay awake. The Wi-Fi, strangely enough, is excellent.

So, welcome to Super A! Natural Apartments.

Hope you brought your own holy water.

I thought I’d add this one request first. It kind of shows what I run into around here on a daily basis. It was before the raid, and a little after things settled down from the building’s cleanse. Pretty tame all things considered.

Maintenance Request #13

Old apartments act up from time to time—rusty pipes, shifting foundations, chewed-out wiring. That’s in a normal building. Here, it’s more like blood worms in the toilet or light

fixtures that spit at you. If you're lucky, you can replace whatever's developed a will of its own. If not, you ignore it until it goes away. Things usually work themselves out. Usually.

Other times, they don't.

Take the lady in 507. Nice enough, but a terrible conversationalist. Name's Wendy Go. I think she's a ventriloquist—she talks in a dozen different voices, none of which make sense. I only go up there during the day. No lights in that apartment, and she keeps the thermostat at a frosty forty degrees (Fahrenheit). She just rocks back and forth in the corner while I work, though she does on occasion work on her hobby. She likes to craft things out of bones, and she hangs them up everywhere. Saw her working on a dreamcatcher made out of tiny animal bones once. Asked if she'd sell it, but she just smiled and said "not for you."

She's got a bad habit of leaving meat out. Even with the cold, the place reeks. And she treats her garbage disposal like it's a woodchipper. Try shoving a whole pot roast down one of those things. Spoiler: it doesn't work. Eventually, it clogs, and then you've got rotting meat water dripping onto the floor, making the place smell like someone got frisky with a corpse they found behind a truck stop.

I requested an industrial disposal—the kind they use in butcher shops—but the brass upstairs rarely approves my suggestions. So, every few weeks, I go up and clean it out before the smell gets too apocalyptic. No idea how the other tenants put up with it.

This time, it was the usual: intestines, offal, a fair bit of hair. I think I found some teeth, but the blades had ground them down to nubs. Weirdest part? I found a wallet. Near the top of the pile, too—just a little slime, nothing worse than my ex-wife's cooking. Bless her heart, she never did regain her sense of smell.

I asked Wendy if it was hers. She said, "It's behind the trees. Get the dogs." If I hadn't been looking at her, I'd have sworn it came from a southern gentleman.

The ID said Timothy Mackwell. No one by that name lives here. She didn't want it, so I tossed it in the lost and found closet. We check in there sometimes when someone loses something or their pet runs off, but nothing ever gets claimed. I kept the twenties, though. A quick spin in the wash and they'll be good as new.

I left the credit cards. I'm not a complete monster.