

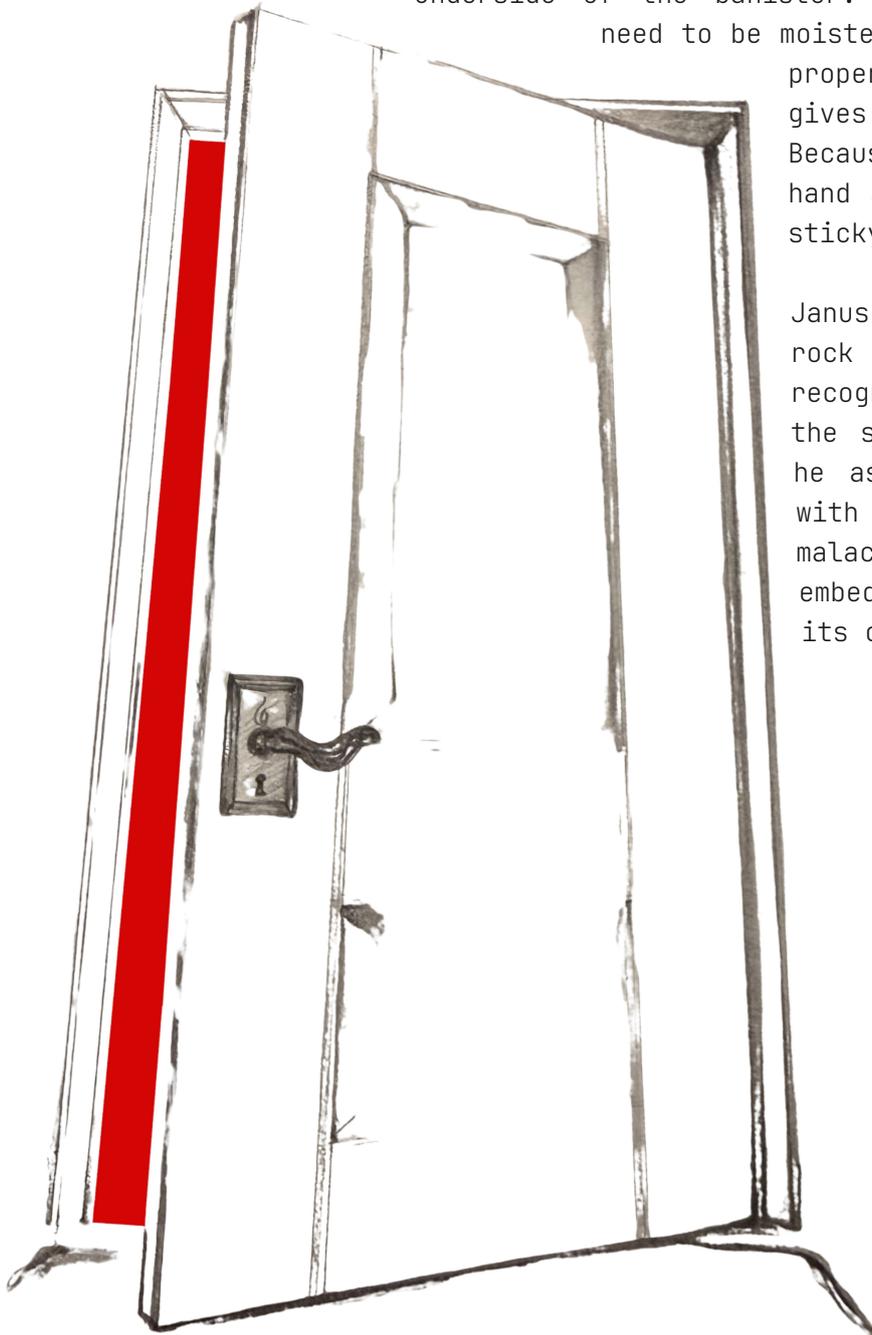
ALEXA, TELL THE CHILD: GOD IS DEAD

by LINNEA GEHLERT

In the corridor, a child sits on the seventeenth step of the wooden staircase and pouts. And while he pouts, he forms little balls out of his boogers and sticks them to the underside of the banister. Particularly dry booger balls

need to be moistened with spit before they stick properly. The wet sliminess always gives the child away in the end. Because when an adult puts their hand around the railing, it's always sticky. Then there's trouble.

Janus sits in the study and analyses rock samples. And whenever he recognises something special about the stones he has in front of him, he asks his tablet to make a note with precise sobriety. 'Alexa, the malachite has a smoky quartz embedment right through its centre.'



A pile of yellow letters sits on the kitchen table with a plate of stale bread and radishes on top. One of them has left a nasty mark on the top envelope. The child has always hated radishes.

On the board in the children's room is a small gemstone set, preserved by the dust that only unpopular gifts can accumulate. It was the mother's idea to give the child something educational. The child would much rather have had an action figure than a pile of rocks.

God is lying dead on the bathroom floor. A fly has made itself comfortable on the carcass and is rubbing its front legs over its antennae. Once. Twice. Thrice. Clumps of dust snow down from the ceiling fan as if God's death had brought on winter.

In the small space under the floor, 'Terra' is carved into the cracked concrete, where Janus' mother had once hidden her most precious treasures. Janus' voice echoes in the cavity: 'Alexa, tell the child in the corridor God is dead,' and the reply 'Sorry, I didn't understand your question.' 'Tell the child...' 'Sorry, I didn't understand your question.'

In the corridor, Janus stands in front of a small, faded imprint on the seventeenth step and shakes his head. He places a hand on the banister and scrapes rough skin across the dry wood.

In the small space under the floor lies a cat skeleton. Above the dusty little bones hangs a sign that reads 'God' in scrawly children's writing. Underneath, almost completely pasted over, it still says 'Terra'. Now Janus uses the secret room to make his long-lost friend comfortable. God's corpse couldn't lay on the bathroom floor forever after all.

In the study, there's a faint echo of the child's voice. Janus looks up from his work, hating him for a moment, then hating the room and its work.

There are no windows in the study, just cupboards and Janus and Alexa holding each other tightly until everything is precisely noted down. Of all the rooms, the study is the furthest away from the corridor.

An alarm clock rings in the study, as if to say: Look, the break is over. And Janus' eyes are squinted until they find even the tiniest remnants of ash in the rock spores. Archaeology and geology are ultimately two sides of the same coin. 'Sorry,' says Alexa, 'I didn't understand you.'

The dust has been cleared from the board in the children's room. The two grams of ametrine made their way from the shelf, fell right in front of the bed. Maybe it was the wind, or maybe God had missed Janus. God and love were such a pair anyway, weren't they?

On the bathroom floor, the child lies in his own vomit of dust and bile. And 'Mum,' it cries, while God purrs around its feet. The seventeenth step emits the tiniest squeak when feet long gone come running.

'Alexa, please delete that.'