

**Fermentation**  
**Donna Kiser**

At 21, I'd already seen a few dead bodies. Most were cushioned in satin and lace surrounded by dim lights reflected in high glossed mahogany. Once, one was in a pool of thick, dark red syrup that oozed down the cemented front stairs of a two-flat in the now yuppie Lakeview. It was the result of a drive-by shooting against the Simon City Royals. Under the moon and star-lit night, the '62 Chevy gleamed a purple black as it cruised slowly down Racine and stopped in front of a two-story gray stone just long enough for those on the stoop, Lil' City, Coco and Scar, to jump up, flash a few finger signs, scream a few muthafucka's and run towards the front door. Automatic blasts rang a sharp rat-a-tat-tat and echoed, bounced back and forth across the street and dispersed into the darkness with the shouts of "King to the bone," as the Chevy sped off, trying to catch the proof of their manhood in the dying echoes, or beat them back to their hideout. Coco and Ballsy lay across the threshold but Lil' City hadn't been so lucky. It was his seventeen-year-old blood that seeped into the cracks of the stoop before it oozed its syrupy descent. Sissy, Coco's girlfriend, and me crawled over the brown shag carpeting and touched the tips of our boyfriends sprawled out fingers before peeking over their huffing bodies into the blanket of silence that pulled up and over the street, and pierced our ears worse than if Lil' City had screamed. There were no screams, only the thud of four young hearts as we held each other close and stared at the boy who'd just taught us all how to play spoons with tequila, a game he'd learned from his uncle. That was my first sight of a dead body out of a funeral home.

This one though, was horrifyingly different than even that. I should've known. I probably should've done something. But what did I know at 21, immersed in Smirnoff to

fog the vision of Scar, my young husband in his own satin and lace scenario. I would see her, a short, frail and gentle woman of 87 years, and I would cringe, run and hide behind my building manager apartment door to keep from doing what most perceived as part of my job – interacting with the tenants. I'd not wanted the job in the first place, but I figured my mother-in-law was trying to help when she'd secured it for me. At 45, she managed a transient hotel where she made out quite well budgeting food stamps and welfare checks for the drunks and addicts that came through. A tiny, red-headed Irish woman with a quick, biting tongue; she was well known, feared and respected in the then ghetto area of North Ave. and Clybourn. The winos would give her their checks on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of every month and she'd take her cut before paying their rent (if they had a rent) and giving them a small allowance so they could join the rest of their clan under the el tracks behind Sam's Wine and Spirits. She kept the food stamps and fed them like a soup kitchen. Once a day, they'd come by for a plate she'd fix and cover in tin foil. More often than not, they wouldn't eat even that one time; they'd sell it for more wine and camaraderie under the el.

The plan was that this cocky whip of a German girl could do the same in the transient hotel on Cleveland Ave., which is now, in 2005, luxury condos. And it was close enough that she could keep an eye on and attempt to keep control of my life. I didn't care anything about it. I drank my Smirnoff with Old Style chasers and watched out of the window for my dead husband to miraculously re-emerge and make everything OK, while I haphazardly tended to two babies. I knew nothing, nor did I care to learn, about managing a building or its peoples or their finances. Nothing about making quick, easy money and I definitely knew nothing, and didn't want to know anything, about old

people. So I ran from that sweet, demented wisp of a woman who lived on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of my building in seclusion and deterioration with only the roaches as her companions.

I said I cringed and fled and that's exactly what I did, for many reasons. One of which I've already mentioned, I didn't want to interact, with anyone, especially the walking dead. But there were other reasons. I didn't want to field complaints. About anything. Complaints about the garbage chute stinking, the elevator not working, the front door not locking and the stick-ups that occurred because of it. There was nothing I could do. I was only the manager. The owner, a quintessential yuppie (before they were so known), young, blond, Lake Forest type, was "absent" and cared even less than I. The main complaint was the heat, or the excess of. Living on the ground floor as I did, with large French doors that opened to a frequent east breeze, if needed, and my constant personal fog, I neither noticed nor cared whether there was too much heat, too little heat or none at all. Since heat rises, on those days, and there were quite a few, when some people on the lower floors said the temperature in their apartments rose past the 90° mark, I can only imagine the oven in the 7<sup>th</sup> floor apartment of "Rhonda Roach," as she was so fondly labeled. And the glee of her scurrying companions in the perfect breeding climate they were privy to.

Even though demented people walk, sometimes, in a completely different dimension, they do retain a semblance of their senses, one of which is smell. So, since the garbage chutes emitted heavy, dark clouds of fermentation, Rhonda Roach, as did many of the other tenants, would bring her garbage down in the elevators, if they were working, and dump it in the containers in the back alley. Most people carried theirs in plastic bags tied securely. Rhonda Roach, on the other hand, would carry her little garbage pail, open

to the atmosphere, in her arms. And she would stop to talk, wish everyone a good morning or a safe evening or comment on the weather or strike up a conversation about the lack of maintenance in the building.

Conversations with Rhonda Roach were short. I was not the only one that fled when she appeared. Living on the ground floor, as I did, my apartment was situated just inside the front entrance of the building and opposite the elevator. My door opened into a large, white marbled foyer. At some point in the past it was a grand entryway. This I made a point of keeping clean. Besides the fact that it led directly into my apartment, it was a bright, cheery area to converse with the people I didn't mind conversing with. There were a few. A young lesbian couple, Lena and Richie, though at that time they were called butches and dikes. Lena was quite the feminine, well dressed model type. Richie however, wore black jeans rolled up over black combat boots and t-shirts pulled tight over bulging muscles, covered by a black motorcycle jacket. I talked to them regularly because I had never before, nor have I since, seen a couple so happy and in love. Richie died later that year from leukemia. We would stand in that expansive, splendid foyer talking, Lena cooing and ga-gaing with my babies, and then the elevator door would ring open and Rhonda Roach would shuffle out and we would try, most times unsuccessfully, to scatter, somewhere. It was those unsuccessful times that led to us naming her and yes I was one of the guilty parties. She would brighten and wave with the ungarbaged hand and shuffle toward our little group. Lena always managed to get away because she used my babies as her excuse.

“Oh, I need to change this one's diaper” or “I think the babies are hungry” or “I think I'll put the babies down for a nap” and she would quickly disappear, leaving Richie

and me shuddering. Rhonda would approach and we felt them before we saw them. We knew they were there and we began to twitch while she was still feet away. The roaches crawled in and around and out of the hugged garbage can, but they didn't stop there. They crawled up Rhonda's neck, into her hair. They crawled down Rhonda's shirt, up and down her arm. They skittered and perched on the tip of the can and rubbed their disgusting antennae at us on lookers, daring us to attempt to squash or shoo or even breath sideways at them. It was impossible to stand for very long and talk or listen to Rhonda. Our skin would crawl and tingle with each one we saw crawl and tingle over Rhonda.

“Uh, I need to check on Lena and the babies.”

“Tell Lena I've gone upstairs to start dinner.”

And Rhonda would be alone with her buddies. Rhonda was always alone with her buddies. Rhonda died alone with her buddies.

Somewhere in the year that I managed that building, the postman rang my bell and inquired about Mrs. Saxony, our very own Rhonda Roach. Seems her mailbox was over flowing, which was unusual because she retrieved the mail everyday when she took her buddies for their stroll. I never even noticed not having to run from her and I have no idea how long it was that I didn't run from her. But I knew what to expect then. I was young, not stupid. I left a message for the absentee Lake Forest blondie owner and called the police. I probably should have waited for them and let them go in first, but again, I was young and maybe just a bit stupid or curious. I took the master key, boarded the ancient, chipped mahogany and bronzed elevator and exited on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. The heat and stench mingled together in a blue haze that crept and crawled, hung and reached for my

throat with smoky skeletal tendrils when the doors rang open. Sweat immediately streamed down my forehead into my eyes, down my temples and cheeks, down the sides of my stomach from my armpits, into the waist of my sweatpants and settled in icy pools at the small of my back. It had to have been at least 100° in the hallway. God only knows what the little closets of apartments were like. I couldn't understand how the other people on the floor hadn't noticed the odor. Hadn't said something. Called someone. Done something. I wondered if they were all dead, baking, fermenting behind the ten doors on each side of the dimly lit hall with its faded red, tattered Oriental carpeting. Luckily, Rhonda was in #702, right across from the elevator, so I didn't have to walk far with that imagination.

I held the master key at arms length and taped it loudly on the door, hoping that maybe Rhonda just didn't feel like picking up her mail. There was, of course, no answer. I inserted the key, turned and pushed the door open with the key, still at arms length. I knew she was dead in there. I didn't need to see her up close and personal. I just needed to verify the situation, lock it back up and let the police and whoever else, do their jobs. I knew she was dead, but I sickened at what I saw. At first, the Smirnoff part of my brain tried to convince the clear seeing portion. It looked like, Smirnoff said, Rhonda was lying on the floor covered with a black and red blanket, a vibrating black and red blanket, Smirnoff whispered. It didn't work for a minute. I knew exactly what was happening there. Rhonda was covered all right, completely. I couldn't even see the body. There were swarming, skittering, crawling, nasty, filthy roaches, that spread over her and across her and onto the floor beside her. A blanket. A cocoon. Layer upon layer of large roaches, small roaches, baby roaches, roach eggs, crusted, oozing, crunching and buzzing, like a

prehistoric, subterranean cave feast. I backed away and away, backed into the elevator, pushed 1 and cried and screamed into the palms of my hands. The police were there when the elevator opened and thankfully, asked no questions. Richie was there too. Lena with my babies. They led me to a glorious glass of cool, clear, clean Smirnoff.