

Under the Sink

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Sheila is in the bathtub now, so Henry is inside his kitchen cabinet, under the sink, listening to her through the wall. This is where he hears her best. One arm is wrapped around the drainpipe; the other pulls his knees in tight against his chest. He is motionless, pleasantly confined. His cheek is wet against the chalky wall. He breathes softly. The warmth and the dampness penetrate him. He imagines the steam of her bath and he is with her – unable to move until she does, unable to breathe until he hears the water respond to her. They are so close.

He hears her say, “roses.” She is on the phone. He imagines her wet skin, a drip of water running down her knee, her thigh. He opens his mouth to taste it.

“Yes, I was surprised,” he hears her say. The water trickles. Perhaps she is lifting her hand now.

“From Gary,” her words echo.

Henry opens his eyes. The kitchen light is pointing at him from the crack in the cabinet door. He kicks it open, scaring the cat.

Two years ago, when Henry lived in the Las Palmas trailer park outside Eureka, he taught himself how to knit. Once or twice a week, he would walk through the sewing and craft section of Walmart. Sometimes, he would read knitting magazines or thumb through pattern files, or he walked down the yarn aisle, feeling the texture of each twisted bunch of thread. He closed his eyes and imagined a simple ribbed sweater, velvety to the touch, with a beaded neckline and flared sleeves. Delicate.

At first, her words were an invasion. "I like your shirt," she had said. The girl was a clerk there. She worked the night shift. "What would you call that color, brick?" From the beginning she talked to Henry as if he were an old friend. She complained that she had to work both the craft and the sporting goods section until three in the morning. "What do I know about sporting goods?" She said to him. She talked to him like this every time he came in, like she knew him.

It wasn't right, the way he felt. He understood that. He started to look for her when came into the store. He memorized her schedule. He wore that shirt, the one she liked.

She was afraid of him then. He understood that too. It made him feel bad, but he didn't stop. She turned away when she saw him coming, fumbled, forgot what she was doing. Henry imagined knitting a sweater for her. He imagined what it would smell like when she took it off at the end of the day.

One night he waited for her in the parking lot. He watched the front doors slide open just after her shift was over. She walked outside looking at her feet as she made her way through the parking lot. She looked over her shoulder just before she got into her car, like she knew.

He wanted to press her close to him so he could take in her scent. He never meant to hurt her. As he followed behind her in his car, he pictured himself on top of her, pressing into her, but just for a brief moment. That wasn't his plan. Henry didn't have a plan. He never had a plan.

He felt relieved when she screamed. He dug his hands into her shoulders and shook her, hard. He wanted to make it scream again. Maybe someone would hear, maybe someone would save him. Instead, she began to cry. Henry didn't like that.

He held her by the neck and pushed her hard against the concrete wall. Her head made a cracking noise as it hit, then it fell forward, loose on her neck. When he let go, she dropped to the ground, holding her head with both hands. She was still sobbing. Henry still didn't like that.

"You hurt me. Why did you hurt me?" She whispered to the ground.

Henry took off his shirt, the one she liked, and stuffed it in her mouth with his fingers. The bones in her skull felt like a bag of rocks through the fabric as he pressed her head into the pavement. His eyes were closed. The spasms of her throat gripped his wrist with each contraction. He was on top of her now, pushing the shirt further down, further inside her.

Henry shook her again and her head bounced off the ground easily, like a rubber ball. She wasn't breathing. It happened so fast, maybe five minutes, that's all.

Henry didn't think about her the same way after she was dead. He didn't want to press her close to him then. He didn't want to take in her scent. That would be sick. Henry wasn't sick. He put her in the back seat of his Buick and he drove home. He laid her down on the braided rug in front of his television – in the front room with the window wide open. He wasn't

trying to hide anything. If he had a choice now, it would be different. He turned on the TV. He should have made a plan.

He filled a small pot with water and set it on the stove to boil. If he had a choice between killing the girl and not killing the girl now, it would be different. Henry wasn't a murderer. He wasn't a rapist, either. He rarely had fantasies about doing those things. He didn't plan to hurt her.

He looked down at her body. She was wearing a blue, Walmart vest with white piping along the edges. A bright yellow, happy-face button was pinned to her chest. The television flashed like a beacon over the two of them. As he looked at her, he imagined her wearing the soft ribbed sweater that he had started to knit, with the beaded neckline and flared sleeves. She was a heavy girl. It would be tight on her. He liked that. Then he went to the kitchen and made himself some macaroni and cheese.

He buried her in the front yard that night. He shoveled dirt over her name tag, Tammy. Henry wasn't trying to hide her. He was laying her to rest, not in the corner of his yard, not behind the shed, but in the middle of his front lawn. It was a big obvious mound of dirt, very out of place. He was going to point it out to them when they came. He sat on his sofa watching television. He stopped going to work. For days, he just sat there, watching TV. He was waiting, but they never came. When he felt he had waited long enough, he left.

It is Saturday now, almost four in the afternoon. Henry pulls himself up from under the sink and goes looking for the cat. Sheila waited all day before getting into the tub and now Henry has a lot of catching up to do. He still needs to fix the door for Mrs. Callahan. He's been

putting that off for weeks. He shakes a box of food and the cat comes running from the living room. Henry can hear Sheila through the wall talking on the phone. Her words are muffled now. She is probably talking to her sister about Gary. Gary makes Sheila cry. Henry still doesn't like that.

She moved in about two months ago. Now, Henry spends most of his day lying in bed, waiting for her to get home or get in the bathtub. She works at an insurance company. It's a brick building on Fourth Street, right next to the Tasty Freeze that serves the chocolate chip milkshakes Henry likes to drink. Sheila has long wavy black hair and wears low-cut, ruffled blouses to work.

He knows exactly how long it takes her to get ready in the morning. She talks to herself when she puts on her makeup. She says things like, damn it eyebrow pencil, go on straight. Sometimes she sings. It's not like what happened in California. He feels helpless. He tells himself, just one more time, and he is back there, under the sink. This is different. Henry is in love with her. Sometimes he cries.

He is sitting perfectly still at his kitchen table, watching the cat. His phone rings but he doesn't answer it. It is Mrs. Callahan.

"I'm sorry to be such a pest," she is saying to his machine, "but my door is hanging on one hinge. I'm afraid it's going to fall off."

Henry is staring at the linoleum.

"I know how busy you are, but if you could just come by sometime this weekend, I would sure appreciate it."

The deep rhythm of the dial tone throbs in Henry's ears. The room becomes bright with light. He has not eaten all day. He is barely aware of the cat rubbing against his leg, purring. He hears the phone ring in Sheila's apartment. He looks up. The ringing stops. He knocks over a bottle of Murphy's Oil in his rush to get back under the sink.

"Yes, I got them," he hears her say. "Thank you." Then she is laughing in another room.

Someone is knocking on Sheila's door. It's late. Henry has fallen asleep again on the kitchen floor. His mouth is open and his tongue feels like cardboard. The cat is curled between his legs, purring. Henry hears a man's voice. He hurries to the living room and puts his eye to the peep hole. He catches the back of a leather jacket at Sheila's front door. Sheila's dress is white, strapless and ruffled at the sleeves. Her hand reaches out and touches Gary on the shoulder easing him in. She's probably smiling. Then the hallway is dark again as the door shuts in front of them.

Henry is a wreck. He tells himself, think, damn it, think. He paces his living room, rubs his face. He makes eye contact with the cat watching him from the corner. Henry goes to the kitchen, under the sink, and puts his ear to the wall. He can hear them in the other room – short muffled sentences separated by long pauses. He runs to the living room and grabs the phone. He dials her number then hangs up when he hears her voice.

Henry can barely make out the words now, but Gary's tone is clear. "Who was that?"

Sheila is defensive, angry. Gary's voice gets louder. They shout at each other.

Gary yells, "You haven't changed!" Sheila's front door is open now and Henry can hear her in the hallway, crying.

“You’re a bastard,” she screams.

Henry has his hand on the doorknob now. He hears a thump and pictures Gary’s fist hitting the wall. Henry is sweating. He drops to his knees.

“Get out!” he hears her say. “God damn you, get out!”

It is after midnight now. Sheila is quiet. Henry is sitting on his sofa. He feels better and thinks he might eat something when he hears a knock on his front door. His heart pounds. He looks through the peep hole and sees her soft round breasts framed in wine stained ruffles. She is swaying back and forth.

She knocks again. “Hey!” she says as she taps a green bottle against his door.

Henry takes a deep breath. He talks through the door. “Yes?” he says. His voice does not sound real.

She presses her mouth against the frame of the door and mumbles in a false deep voice, “Hey Mr Fix It, I need you to take a look at my drain.” She giggles.

Henry looks around for a clock. He asks himself, “Where’s the clock? Where’s the god damned clock?” His hands are sweaty.

“It’s late,” he says. He looks through the peep hole at her breasts. They tremble slightly, like she’s starting to cry. He opens the door then to let her in. He looks down, away. He can’t look at her.

She taps the middle of his chest with her bottle and steps inside. “Do you have a cigarette?” She puts the bottle to her mouth and tilts her head back. Her black waves fall thick across her bare shoulders.

Henry closes his eyes. "I don't smoke," he says. He opens his eyes again, slowly. She is still there, her back to him. Her body is leaning to one side. She holds out one arm, then the other, staggers, and turns back to face him. A streak of black mascara runs from her eye to the middle of her cheek. Henry wants to hold her close to him. He looks down, focusing on her bare feet. He shuts the door behind him, keeping his hand on the doorknob.

"Something's wrong with your drain?" he asks.

She shakes her head in slow motion, turning it as far to the left and as far to the right as she can. She holds up the bottle and smiles. "Want some?"

"No, thank you."

He watches her look around his living room. She points at the cat and says, "Pretty kitty, kitty, kitty." She leans too far forward and lets out a little squeak, but catches herself before she falls. She starts toward the kitchen. Henry follows.

The cabinet door is open, exposing the emptiness under the sink. She points at the spilled bottle of Murphy's Oil. "Uh, oh," she says. She steps sloppily over the cat's bowl and around a pile of brown paper bags. She holds out her arms and stops fast, as if she's found herself at the edge of a cliff. She struggles to find her balance. In one motion, she pivots and plops down, crossed-legged on Henry's kitchen floor. She is facing him now, staring up. The corner of her white skirt is twisted, the tip of it soaking in the Murphy's Oil.

"What do you want?" Henry asks.

She takes another drink from the bottle, spilling more red wine down the front of her blouse.

"What do *you* want?" she asks, pointing at him with the green bottle.

She kicks out one leg and hits the cat's bowl with her foot. The dried pellets jingle inside the dish as it slides across the floor. Sheila puts her hand over her mouth, "Oops." She kicks out her other leg and spills more wine on her skirt. She sets the bottle on the linoleum between her thighs. Then, she looks Henry straight in the eye.

"It's late," he says, turning his head.

"Hey buddy," she mumbles. She is pointing at him with the bottle again, "You called me."

Henry feels cool air hit the sweat on his back. He wants to reach out to her, grab her, touch her hair. She's watching him. He can feel her eyes staring into him. He can't bring himself to look back. He can't move. She knows.

"I like your shirt," he says.

Sheila falls sideways. Her head hits the ground with a thud.

Henry takes the green bottle from between her thighs and puts it in the sink. He stands behind her, taking her hands in his. He pulls her limp body gently into his living room, watching as her red toenails skip over the Berber carpet. He opens the front door and looks out before dragging her into the hallway.

They are inside her apartment now. He shuts the door and turns the deadbolt. Sheila has left her television on. She is lying in front of it, face down on her living room floor. Henry walks into her bathroom. He gets on his knees and starts the water, feeling for the right temperature. He walks back to Sheila and looks down at her. He kneels to touch the ruffles on her blouse. As he pulls the blouse over her head, the back of his hand brushes across her hair. He is careful not to look at her breasts. He looks away when he pulls down her skirt.

Blouse and skirt in hand, he walks to the bathroom. On his knees, he dips the blouse in the water and brings it back up, carefully. He drizzles Sheila's mango-scented body wash over the wine stain. He works on the stain, rinsing and scrubbing with his fingers. The soap and the Murphy's oil make bubbles in the water. He scrubs the blouse and then the skirt until his knuckles are raw. He wrings them dry, carefully, then hangs them over the shower rod.

Henry goes back to the living room. He picks her up, cradling her in his arms. Her limbs flop sideways as he walks toward her bedroom. He knows where it is. He places her on the bed, holding her head gently with his hand as he rests it on a feather pillow, then covers her softly with a blanket. He is looking at her face now, round and full with wine-stained lips.

Henry shuts the front door as he leaves. He locks it with his master key. He thinks about the unfinished sweater in his bottom drawer. A cardigan, with a Peter Pan collar and tiny pearlescent buttons down the front. It's a complicated pattern. Delicate. The label on the spool of yarn read, "tangerine," but Henry thinks it looks more like blood orange.

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