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The Guy I'm After

Frank, who lived upstairs, and I, decided to take the television tubes to the drugstore to test them out on the tube testing machine that I had seen behind the magazine racks. We had emptied the t.v. of its tubes when, one day, we were flipping channels, and the screen went back to green and the sound still played. We put the tubes in a brown bag and I noticed there were different numbers and letters marked on the top of each one, and the television seemed to lose some of its charm.

Frank helped me do it because he was locked out of his house and it was too cold to stay outside so he asked me if he could please come in for a while, and said that his roommate should be home soon.

“The one who plays Mozart on the piano?” I asked.

He said yes, and then I described his appearance to Frank, and Frank described him back to me differently and then I agreed with Frank's description of him because I figured he knew him better.

“Don't you have a key,” I said, and he said, “No. I forgot them, they're upstairs.” Then we both agreed that it was best to check with the neighbors when something like this happened because sometimes they knew how to get in your house when you didn't.

We decided to watch some television and I apologized for the furniture and Frank didn't seem to mind when I straightened the table cloth that covered holes in the sofa before he sat down. I explained to him that it was a sofa bed, a good one, that often people stayed over and it beat the floor. It was free I told him and so heavy it took four people to move it.

Frank rubbed his hand along the tweed covered arm and the exposed wood at the end then he wrapped his coat more tightly

around him and looked into the television.

A while later when we didn't like the video that was on I said, "Does your heater work? Ours leaks gas and the whole house smells after you turn it on and you can fall asleep quickly if you lie next to it while watching television." When Frank didn't reply I said, "asphyxiation," and that was when the screen on the television went blank.

While Frank messed with the television I went into the kitchen to clean up the leftovers of a cake that was chopped into pieces but not eaten. It was white with yellow and peach colored bells and the words were all chopped so that you couldn't read them but it had said, "Congratulations Nola and Phil." I scraped one of the flowers off with my finger, the cake was hard and spongy, and if there had been a dog around I would have fed it to him because dogs like it when you do that sort of thing.

I wanted to know if Frank had a dog but he walked in with a television tube and said, "You got a knife?"

It had frosting on it but I gave him the one for the cake. Then I put the cake in the trash that was already overflowing and asked Frank if he wanted any help; he said no that he used to be a television repairman before he became an astronomy professor and that he thought the television could be saved.

Underneath our building was a basement, a large basement, large enough for a boat, and it was painted with designs, pictures of children and a map of the world. I hadn't gone down there often but that was where Phil had gotten the money for the rent last month. He had sold Frank's boat. Shortly after that, one day outside, I almost sold Frank's rudder when Frank approached and asked how much.

"Five dollars," I said, "or best." Then he told me it was his rudder from his stolen boat so I gave it to him and he took it to his apartment upstairs. I stayed outside, with some friends selling everything else that had accumulated in the basement for the last five years since the landlord said he was bringing a truck to haul it away. That day I made sixty dollars selling things that didn't belong to me.

On the evening of the day that we dismantled the television set, Phil came home. It was the first time since we were married. But

it was late and he crawled in through the bedroom window. I stood in the hallway deciding whether to run or to stay and try to identify the outline of a man with his arms outstretched, clinging in the dark to the sides of the window, his feet on the sill. I ran and went out the back door and was outside when I looked back and saw Phil through the broken backdoor window. It was held together with masking tape. When I came back inside Phil asked if I had seen his black loafers.

Music by Mozart had begun to play upstairs and I made coffee in my pajamas and used paper towels because there were no filters and listened to Phil rummage through the room looking for shoes.

"They smelled like garlic," I said, and the water started to boil over, then the paper towels had torn because they were the generic kind. The coffee came out with a texture like I imagined those plastic Christmas scenes would have if you tasted them. The ones you turn upside down and shake where the snow flutters around the house and the reindeer, in the water.

"Phil," I said when he had come back looking like someone was to blame, "when you go to buy cigarettes can you pick up some M&M's for me?"

"Any calls?" he said, but I had decided to take a bath and was already in the bathroom where I could pretend not to hear. The bathroom had looked great that night because early in the morning I washed the mildew off the ceiling with ammonia and bleach. I sat in the bathtub, a thick piece of wood lay across the top of the tub, and that's where I put my book when I stopped reading and went underwater.

I liked my name because it was different. Sometimes people said Lola by mistake, they called me "No," sometimes, but I didn't mind. But Phil calls himself Phil because no one can pronounce his name. He has large hands, basketball hands he says, because he played a lot when he was younger. His hands became flatter and wilder. He says that sometimes he didn't know who he really was. That was when he was serious, but the rest of the time it was hard to tell.

The telephone was ringing when I got out of the tub, but I didn't try to answer it. I dried off slowly and opened the window when a

cool blast of air sucked in, making the door that I thought was already closed, slam shut. I opened it and went into the hallway.

"Did you bring M&M's?" I asked Phil. He was putting together some things.

"Going to Tahoe," he said. Then I dried my hair and tried out my other roommate's hairspray. It came in a gigantic can and the nozzle broke off before I got a chance to spray it. The can was still full, but it was bound to break, I figured, before anyone could use that much hairspray. Then I ate the M&M's.

When I called to talk to some friends at work they said, "Get a divorce. It's the only possible way." Since the television was broken I sat with them at a bar and drank coffee one night, then another and another. The next time Phil came home he slept on the floor by the heater. He turned it on and the house smelled like gas and I called the landlord the next day and told him he better remove the heater.

One day I sat on the front porch with Frank. The television wasn't working but the tubes had not been tested yet. And I told him about the people next door. They were blind, but only functionally blind or something, I wasn't sure. We watched the woman climb the stairs and I had the feeling she saw us behind the dark glasses that she wore. They had shades on their windows but I could often see them through the partially open shade in the kitchen. The light would shine yellow and I watched the shadows of the two elderly people, I imagined they were married, and it was nice to know they watched me. I had seen them at night when the lights in my room were on.

Then Frank said that one of his neighbors stacked their shoes at the entry way at the foot of the stairs, he didn't know why. There were thongs, tennis shoes and high heels, Frank said. All lined up. Then before he went upstairs, at his house, he took his shoes off too, thinking it would be best. Frank wore an expensive looking jacket, all lined with fur, although it wasn't really leather he said, he'd "hate to kill an animal." On his feet he wore Birkenstocks, and he's letting his flat-top grow out since now he says that he's looking for work.

"My husband," I told him, "doesn't know who he is. It all started when he was fourteen and he thinks he'll never find out."

We both looked down the street. Nothing was different. Then Frank showed me his motorcycle, it looked like others I had seen, and he got on it and went to work.

When Phil and I married there were no pictures because the camera jammed and all the pictures got exposed on the same frame. That's what my friend who took the pictures said later so I had nothing to look back on. Phil said it's better that we just remember, we don't have to see.

One day after Phil had left, I stopped to rest on a park bench. A man walking slowly approached and said, "How far can you see." I didn't usually rest on park benches because when no one was around, just the tall trees, it always felt like something was about to happen. I said, "Pretty far," and began walking. I was near-sighted. I wore contact lenses. He wouldn't have known if I lied or told the truth and I wondered what he thought when I said that. The park was creepy and I walked quickly. It was starting to mist and I could hear the cars on the street but I was surrounded by trees. I wanted to see the street.

The day Phil left he had had the entire room torn apart. He said he was taking only what he needed. I sat in the window watching him. I'd hold on to the window and lean out as far as I could, my legs still in the room. Phil still couldn't find his black shoes.

"Will you paint when I'm gone?" he asked me.

"You just got a ticket," I said. He had parked his car on the sidewalk again.

Frank called me last night and said we could go and test the television tubes the next day. I told him that's good because it's about the time we had it fixed, it's like staring at an empty box. He asked if the tubes were still in the bag. I said that they were and he said "don't break them," that some of them still might be good, you never can tell.

So now I call Phil's sister because I decide to return her pan but there is no answer. Phil must be on his way to Egypt, and I don't think he's coming back.

The night before, a woman with an elastic necked dress edged with lace, showed a tremendous amount of cleavage when she bent

to take our orders at the restaurant. I had the carbonara, one of my friends from work had the primavera. The sauce was too salty.

"Why did we come here? I knew we shouldn't," I said. There was spaghetti on the floor in the entry way and the waitress smiled while she picked up the strands with a napkin she had found under a chair. We drank room temperature red wine. There were juke boxes on each table and it reminded me of a truck stop I had been to that had telephones for all the drivers. They were in the booths along the wall and when you sat there erroneously and the waitress and the truck drivers knew you weren't a truck driver, it made you want to apologize and say that you didn't know. But that would never be enough. They'd watch you when your food came and when you went out of the restaurant. The windows would be shining and clear. The bathrooms would smell like disinfectant, and there would be a woman two stalls down, who knew better than to sit in the area for truck drivers. She would be complaining to someone that there were no toilet seat covers.

But this waitress didn't stare, she kept smiling and brought more wine.

Phil's not Italian but he can cook anything. He breaks and turns eggs with one hand, tosses linguini by flipping his wrist. The second to the last time I saw him he wore a hat, a white pleated hat that puffs up on his head and makes his hair go straight where the band flattens it. He used to say that when he finds out what he wanted he wouldn't cook anymore.

If I knew what I wanted, I'd tell Phil, I always thought. But he'd say, "Listen to me, listen to me," and go on about something.

The telephone bill hangs on the refrigerator by a magnet shaped like a carrot. I circled all the calls that were mine. Now I'm not sure if the pan belongs to Phil's sister, I could be wrong, it could be ours. I wish Frank were home so I call him, and he is home, and we decide to go have a drink somewhere.

We go to this bar I know of and we sit in the booths. The whole place is set up diner style, formica table tops, a dirty floor and booths in different colors.

I said, "Frank, did you get a job yet?"

He said yes that he did but only part time.

We both look around the room and watch the people. I ordered

gin because it sounded right. But they do have almost every kind of beer you could want and some good ones on tap. Across the room, on the other side of the bar are the pool tables. I haven't played in a while, so Frank and I go mark our names down on the chalkboard and wait.

"I come here for the people," I tell Frank. "No one dresses in anything they wouldn't wear on a regular day running errands. It's very cool. Lots of black."

Frank thinks it would have been cooler if we had taken his motorcycle, I know that's what he's thinking, but he's too polite to say it. He's not from this area. Besides the tubes are in the back seat of my car and we might want to stop to fix the television.

I decide that I like this bar. We talk to people from different places. I win a game at pool. Only one. So I break and then it's the next person's turn. It's a cool place. I decide that I will come here to apply for a job the next day. It will be great working here in the evenings. When we leave I remember that I forgot to tell Frank about his boat, but then there's a lot of things that Frank doesn't know.