

The Garbage Man

Inhaling the window's stale dust, she presses into the rail for the second time. One, two, three—push! She grunts, then swears under her breath. Nothing. The sash is jammed shut and she gives up. Resting her forearms on the rail, she stares at the storefronts across Main Street. Vehicles whir by unnoticed until a noisy whine approaches from the north. The tractor passes slowly, then stops at the intersection for a turn to who knows where. Her eyes return to the façade of the hardware store and its pretty Victorian trim, but the owner is a sour puss. Next door is the post office but those jobs are patronage and she's an outsider. Her gaze shifts to the five and dime—maybe there? He'll expect her to work somewhere close because she won't need a car.

A man appears from an alley alongside the store, carrying a galvanized garbage can. He limps stiffly to the back of a grimy blue truck, dumps the trash and then punches the base of the can. A piece of plastic wrap escapes in the breeze. He returns the can, then crouches beside one of the store's basement windows. She squints. He lifts something as he stands and places it against his cheek. It's a kitten and she spins about, ready to run for her camera, but remembers it's still packed. A

calico cat jumps out of the window's pit and the man knells to stroke her body. He rips open a packet, shaking the pellets onto the ground. Walking up the street to where the houses begin, he greets another cat. "Huh," she whispers into the glass, "a real popular guy."

She turns around and looks at all the boxes he's left her to unpack—that's her job, the house. She has to begin the familiar routine of setting up a new home and be all happy about it. The place is partially furnished, courtesy of her mother-in-law and former occupant.

Walking from room to room, she wonders why the windows were stripped of their treatments and how anyone could stand such a hideous green in the master bedroom. She's seen the bathroom several times but enters again, hoping. Still too small for a darkroom.

Alone at the kitchen table, she begins scribbling a to-do list onto a tiny pad. Birds sing loudly in the backyard, crazy with the warmth and promise of spring, but by the fifth item tears fill her eyes and she can't see. Leaning over the table, she rests her arms upon its cool surface and lays her head down, unable to fight an overwhelming sorrow.

She decides to make coffee and unpack her photography equipment. With the percolator gurgling softly on the counter, she pulls a camera lens out of its box and scolds herself for

being caught off guard—a classic mistake of amateurs. She loads a roll of film into one camera and is about to load another when she hears a hollow thumping. She sits straight up, muscles tense, staring at the door to the back room. Short but athletic, she can easily escape out the front, but curiosity binds her in place. The heavy thumps get closer. She holds her breath, but the steps take something and retreat back down the stairs, leaving the outside door open.

She grabs a camera and hurries to the dining room. Peeking out a window that faces the driveway, she mutters, “It’s just the garbage man,” and damn if he doesn’t have another cat following him. She waits a moment, then heaves the sash up, leans out and snaps the shutter. The cat stares for an instant before it bolts, but the hulking form in blue coveralls continues toward the street. She brackets a few more shots, then slips into the doorway to the back room.

“Thanks for doing that,” she says, leaning against the doorjamb, her arms folded. His head jerks up and his body freezes in the outer doorway, blocking light into the windowless room. She moves forward and extends her hand. “Hi, my name is Gwen.”

He sets the can down but bangs into it as he steps forward. Shaking her hand, he says, “Hi, it’s Henry, nice to meet you. Wasn’t sure if you were all moved in, but my boss said to start

pick-up today.”

“You guys knew I was coming?”

His red beard brushes against his chest as he nods.

“Huh. Well anyway, I’m here now and I’m bored. Would you care for some coffee? He hesitates, looking out the back door. “Just a ten minute break? You won’t get into trouble, I promise.”

He skids the can into the one corner not stacked with boxes and follows her into the kitchen.

“Sorry the house is a mess—I’m still unpacking.” She pours the coffee into mugs and they sit at the table. “How long have you been doing this job?”

“About ten years, something like that.”

“Do you like it here—working in this town?”

“It’s okay, it keeps me busy. I can afford my own place, pay my bills. I don’t drive so I save money. That’s important, right?”

“So I’m told. You were driving a blue truck, unless you got an invisible partner somewhere.”

“That’s the city’s. I mean my own car—I don’t have one.”

She laughs. “I know, I’m just teasing. That makes two of us, Henry—I don’t have one either.” She takes a sip of coffee and he follows her lead, bending his head down into his mug and wetting his mustache. He quickly swipes his hand over his

mouth, embarrassed, and she can't help but smile. "Do you remember when Missus Schmidt lived here?"

"Oh yeah, but it's been over a year—she went south I think."

"That's right, Florida. She's my mother-in-law. My husband thought it'd be nifty to move here, but he's away on business, so other than unpack and look for a job, I'm free to do what I want—which at the moment is photography. That's what all this stuff is for." She sweeps her hand over the black equipment spread out on the table. "Do you have any hobbies?"

"I like animals—mostly pets. I feed them on my route. Have you seen the cat that lives around here? He's orange."

"Yes, I think I did. A very handsome cat. You seem to have a lot of feline friends. Do you have a family? Are you married?"

He averts his eyes and stares at the floor. "I should get back to work," he finally says.

"Oh, right, okay." Did she pry too much? He thanks her as he rises, then turns for the back door. "Hey, let me show you out the front, it's easier." He pauses, looking unsure, and she holds her hand out. "Come on, I'll guide you through the mess."

Waving goodbye from her small stoop, she watches as he disappears down the driveway of his next stop.

She pours the remains of his coffee into the kitchen sink and opens the faucet valves. Washing her hands—he did handle garbage after all—she feels suddenly guilty for doing so. His strong fingers felt nice. Holding her wrists under the tap, the water’s warm pressure feels good. She lingers a moment and then remembers her to-do list, but instead she decides to go upstairs and take a hot, relaxing bath.

* * *

Gwen reapplies another shadow color, trying to match her brown eyes. She didn’t care much for makeup, but Coreen said it’d be wise—first impressions being important—not to come off looking like a hippie girl. The movement apparently isn’t well regarded in these parts.

Hearing a rap on the front door, she ducks her head out the bathroom. “Hey, come on in, I’m almost ready.” She looks again into the mirror on the medicine cabinet. Such plain, brown hair. She gives a blast of spray to the wave hanging off her shoulders, then smears on some pink lipstick. “Not bad for a tomboy.”

Her shoes click down the hardwood steps, she greets Coreen and the two heavy doors of a sixty-five Catalina bang shut. Coreen is driving Gwen to her first meeting with the Cassburg Homemakers Association—said to promote good nutrition, child rearing and other domestic skills, along with

community service. She stopped in last night to invite Gwen and welcome her to Cassburg, county seat and home of the Catamounts, one of Missouri's legendary football squads. She had known Gwen's husband—star quarterback and sweet-talker—all through high school and informs Gwen of this fact more than a few times.

The host, a woman called Donna, pours coffee for her guests, who sit around the living room chatting. The women are at ease and occasionally smile at Gwen, perhaps excited to have a fresh body present. They are meeting to discuss the strategic placement of flowers downtown, but no one appears concerned this hasn't been mentioned yet. She notices the low voices and expressions of surprise that indicate gossip. Rubbing the hem of her skirt down along her knees, she glances at Coreen, who announces, "Ladies, Gwen's husband—I'm sure most of you've heard of Tim Schmidt—is in Europe now, studying some farming techniques—right Gwen?"

"Yes, he's in the Netherlands, studying hydroponic farming."

"Hydro what?" a girl asks, holding her large headed baby and blowing a plume of cigarette smoke toward the ceiling.

"Ponic," Gwen replies, "hydroponic. It's how you grow plants without soil, in a greenhouse. Your plants get a sort of nutrient bath and they—"

“Wow,” the girl says, “the Netherlands. Is that like, in Holland?”

“Yes it is, same place.”

“You must be so proud of Tim,” a woman with a lazy eye gushes.

“Well I’m hoping this scheme will be more fruitful than the last.” Gwen stares at her lap, suddenly realizing how ungrateful she sounded.

There’s a few seconds of silence before the lazy-eyed woman says, “Well, I think one should always be supportive of her husband—it must be so hard for him to be away. When will he be coming back?”

Her face flushes with heat. “Uh, yeah, it’s hard—but he’ll be back in about three weeks.”

“Gwen has a neat hobby herself,” Coreen says. “She keeps busy with photography and takes real nice pictures too—I’ve seen some of them.”

“Maybe she can photograph our flowers—if we ever get them in,” Donna says, steering the conversation back to the business at hand.

On the drive home, Gwen asks Coreen, “The garbage man for our side of town—Henry—have you met him?”

“Oh yeah, he’s been here quite awhile. What about him?”

“Do you know what happened to his leg?”

“Not really. But that’s probably the least of his problems. He’s got a bit of a reputation around here.”

“Really? Like what?” She turns sideways to face her.

“Like being somewhat nuts. For his first three years or so in town he kept asking people if they seen his wife—but I don’t know if he was making her up or something did happen to her or what. I was told his mind snapped from some kind of accident and he ended up here. You know he almost got fired once—took the city’s truck on a mission to find her. Sad. Good looking man, too. I’ve seen him once without that beard—he looks a whole lot younger.” She downshifts, bumping Gwen’s knee. “Oh, sorry sister.”

They ride in silence for a minute until Gwen sees the Southside Esso pass by; she’s almost home. “I invited him in for coffee, you know.”

“No you didn’t. When was that?”

“Yesterday morning. He was quiet, a little anxious I suppose. He clamed up when I asked him about a wife, but he seems normal. He loves animals.

“Yeah well, believe me—he could have been normal at one time, but not now. Of course, in Missouri, normal is hard to pin down exactly.”

“Coreen, you’re bad.”

“It’s true,” she adds, giggling. “We set the gold standard

for abnormal. Well, here we are.”

“You’re lucky to have such a nice car,” Gwen says as she climbs out.

“Keep in touch. Let’s do something together soon.”

“Okay,” she replies, swinging the long, heavy door shut.

* * *

Gwen lies naked in bed, covered only by a sheet. It rained overnight and with the windows open the morning’s cool air fills the room. Her skin tingles as she listens to a car passing by on Main Street—its tires making a loud hiss that recedes to a whisper, then silence. It’s Sunday morning, her favorite time of the week and she’s going to be shooting all day.

Stepping out the front door, she looks up and smiles. The sky is a crisp blue, washed clean by the rain. Walking past the stone clad Grange, she takes several shots of the iron fire escape along its side. She captures a phone booth in raking sunlight, its distorted shadow thrown far across an empty parking lot. Puddles are scattered like broken mirrors and she records the image of a laundromat in one of them. At the rail yard she photographs doves exploding from the chute of a grain elevator, startled by the screech of machinery. Headlights flicker in the distance, then the short blast of a horn—a freight train is coming. It rumbles in slowly beside her, the diesel engines pulsating through the earth, into her legs and up

through her body. It squeals to a stop, idling for a few minutes until the beast's loud whine fades to a sharp clicking. Three men climb down narrow steps as she walks up to them. "Hey, you fellows mind if I take your picture?"

"Sure, why not," they respond, one man joking, "Better do it before my wife gets here."

The men are gracious and the engineer helps her up into an empty boxcar. "I got to warn you," he says, "we head back out tomorrow, so don't fall asleep or you'll end up in Kansas City."

She eats her lunch in the car's doorway, absorbing the warm sunlight. Swinging her legs over the edge of the floor, she stares at her dirty blue jeans and smiles—content, for the moment at least, within a rare happiness.

On her return to the center of town, smartly attired townspeople enter a diner after church services. One man walks away on the sidewalk with a familiar stiff gait. She watches as a white cat runs up to him from the side of a house. She ducks under an arched trellis at the head of a residential walkway, swaps out her normal lens for a telephoto and starts snapping frames.

"What you doing there?" An elderly man stands a few yards behind her on the walkway, pointing with his cane.

"Oh ah, hi—I'm just taking some photographs."

"Well what for?" he says, a dumbfounded look on his face.

“It’s a hobby of mine.”

“Hobby? We thought you were hiding in the bushes. You better leave—you’re making my wife nervous.”

She steps back onto the sidewalk—her head down, fiddling with her camera—feeling exposed and foolish.

“Henry—Henry,” she yells as she jogs across the street. “Remember me?”

He had been kneeling, petting the cat, but now he stands and smiles. “Yes, you’re the coffee lady. How you doing?”

“Fine. You remember my name, don’t you?”

“I remember, sure.”

“Well, what is it then?”

“Coffee lady,” he says, his smile growing wider.

She rests her hands on her hips. “You’re just kidding I hope, or did you really forget?”

“It’s Gwen.”

She lands a weak punch into his bicep. “That’s for teasing me, wise guy.” She strokes the fabric of his lapel. “You look nice today—you just got out of church, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I go every Sunday, then I take a walk. Looks like you’ve been out walking too—taking pictures?”

“Yes, and as a matter of fact, you know what? I think we ought to get a shot of this cat. Watch how easy.” She starts tracking the cat through her camera as it circles around his legs.

Click. “There. I think I got it.” But she’s leaned too far and has to grab his arm for support. “Oh sorry,” she says, giggling. “Hope my dirt didn’t rub off on you. I was in a boxcar earlier and it was—”

“Would you walk with me, Gwen?”

“Sure.”

Strolling alongside, she glances at his face while he looks ahead—as if concentrating on something invisible. “I love Sundays,” she says, wanting his attention, “especially on such a warm, spring day. What about you?”

“I suppose church is okay. Sundays—they can be sad.”

“Yeah, they can be. What makes them sad for you?”

“Thinking too much.”

“What do you think about?”

“My wife. We used to go to church together. I don’t know where she is. Sometimes I think she’s dead, and that makes me go crazy I get so scared. They call them panic attacks, but I won’t take the treatments—they said it would make me forget about her.”

“I’m sorry Henry. You know what, here.” She fishes around in her rucksack and pulls out a small camera, a Brownie Instamatic. “Take this, it’s all ready to use. You can take pictures of your animal friends, or whatever you like. I’ll get them developed for you when you’re done. It’ll be fun to see

how they turn out.”

He takes it from her hand and stares at it.

“You want me to show you how to use it?” He nods. “It’s real easy.” She arranges the camera within his large hands. “Now don’t get too close.” She has him snap a photo of herself. “There, you’re a photographer. Now you just turn the knob to advance the film for the next shot.”

He lowers the camera, smiling. He points down the street, starts to speak but hesitates and then they both talk at the same time.

She laughs. “You go first.”

“I don’t live far from here—would you like a cup of coffee?”

“I’d love some, Henry.”

* * *

The steel blue Catalina purrs, cruising at seventy on the new interstate—Kansas City lies just ahead. From her open window, Gwen watches as one scene slides smoothly into the next, their details fleeting and unrecorded—a world of possibilities. On this April morning everything is bathed in soft, green light. She breathes the fresh air pouring in and feels drunk with happiness. “Thanks for doing this, it means a lot to me.”

“Oh, pleasure’s mine, sister. Any excuse to get out of Cassburg for the day is groovy with me.”

Coreen sits behind the wheel, a white scarf fluttering about her coal black, Irish hair. Besides taking Gwen to the camera shop to buy print paper and chemicals, she's added boutiques and a bar to their urban itinerary. Tall and gorgeous, she's an enigma—doesn't work, no voiced aspirations—told to stay home and await a possible pregnancy. Too bad Tim didn't keep her. The ugly thought arose before she could stop it, and Gwen winces, then squirms in her seat—her freshly washed jeans still stiff this early in the day.

“You know I've had my film enlarger for three years and never had a chance to use it. Tim was mad when I bought it. But now—nothing's going to stop me.”

“What do you think he'll say when he sees all the new stuff?”

“Well, he won't see it. The darkroom won't be at our house.”

“No?”

“Nope. Henry's agreed to set it up in his bathroom. There's more room, no window.”

Coreen's mouth hangs open and she eases off the gas. “The garbage man? You serious?”

“Yeah—there's no place for it in our house.”

“When did you decide all this?”

“Yesterday. I ran into him leaving church and he invited

me into his apartment for coffee.”

“You went into his place?”

“Yeah, and I mentioned that I was frustrated because my bathroom wasn’t fit for a darkroom, so he offered me his. He wants to learn about photography.”

Coreen’s attention returns to the highway, passing a Mustang to resume her high rate of speed.

“He’s not from Cassburg, is he?” Gwen asks.

“No, he’s from a few counties over, to the east.” She banks hard onto an exit ramp.

“How did he end up working in Cassburg?”

“The county’s social services arranged it. They got him a job that would be suited for, well, his special condition. The sponsor or agent—can’t recall his name—is probably still there. My mother-in-law used to work in the courthouse—she knows just about everything going on in town.”

“Is that where social services is located?”

“Yeah. Gwen, why are you so interested in this guy?”

“I don’t know—he just seems so sad about his wife, or imagined wife. She’s real to him. It’s like he was set adrift here—confused and stuck.”

“Well I wouldn’t get too involved with a guy like that. Somebody’s bound to get hurt.”

“Hey,” Gwen says pointing, “that’s the street ahead, up at

the tire shop. Take a left—we're almost there.”

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In the dim glow of a red bulb, Henry watches the image of a dog appear on a sheet of light sensitive paper. It's submerged in a shallow tray of developer solution and Gwen pokes at it with a pair of wooden tongs. A small, spotted dog stands on his hind legs along a chain link fence, his nose and paws poking out through the gaps.

“That's Spanky,” he says, excited. “He won't stop barking until I give him a treat.”

More of his images appear as the sheets are moved through the developer, rinse, and fixer trays—cats in several poses, a squirrel on the tail fin of a car, an elderly woman sweeping off her walk. “Hey, these are really nice,” she says. “Wow, another good shot—just needs a little cropping on the left.”

She exposes another roll of negatives and then the last image to be printed appears—the shot of the white cat circling around Henry's legs.

“Yikes!” she says, “What happened here?” The entire scene is out of focus.

“It must be one of yours.”

She giggles and looks into his grinning face. “I'm going to forget you said that, wise guy.” Without thinking, she reaches around him for a quick hug but his hands press into her back

and she's held tight.

"You can kiss me if you want," she says, pushing up on her toes, offering her lips—but he only drops his head beside hers, his warm breath steady on her neck. "All right," she whispers, "we'll just hold each other."

* * *

Her hands rest on the kitchen table, cradling a tiny transistor radio. When the morning ag report begins, Gwen turns the dial to find more music, then abruptly snaps it off. The birds are singing. She leans forward into the table's cool, chrome edging and sips coffee. Her knee bouncing incessantly, she stares out the window above the sink and listens to a meadowlark's song—so sincere and beautiful, so unconcerned about the future. She hasn't looked for a job, half the household remains unpacked and there's only two weeks left before Tim returns.

She had a dream last night: She stood inside an enclosed porch and running about on the floor—agitated and squawking—was a little brown bird. Without hesitation she opened a window. The bird flew out and landed on a nearby stump where it fanned its tail feathers, its plumage bursting into an array of beautiful colors. It danced in a circle, singing a joyous melody.

Soon she'll be with him, shooting scenes together, but this time she'll bring him to her favorite spot outside of town—

where wildflowers sway in a grassy meadow, where the stream has cut a bank covered in swallow nests—and there she will tell him.

* * *

Excited to reach the rail yard, Gwen races ahead toward a line of boxcars but then stops, suddenly ashamed. She stands watching as Henry lumbers toward her, his camera swinging about his chest—obviously trying to catch up.

“I’m sorry,” she calls to him, “that was rude of me to take off like that. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, then smiles and waves his arm forward to reassure her. “Go on, I’ll be there soon enough.”

But she waits and then remains close beside him. She points out possible compositions as they explore together—coaxing him to see things in a new light—to see the beauty that exists, sometimes hidden, right before our eyes.

After spending forty minutes in the rail yard, she tells him it’s time to move on. They continue through town, stopping to shoot along the way, until she finds Ash Street. They descend the sloping pavement until it bottoms out beside a ramshackle bar. Just beyond, its final sections cracked and attacked by weeds, the sidewalk ends.

Walking along the shoulder of the road, the town’s last

houses fall behind them as the breeze freshens, sighing through the budding trees, over the fallow fields and across the many farms of Cassburg County.

Arriving at the turn-off, she takes his hand and leads him to a metal gate, its cedar posts weathered silver-gray. They enter and the tractor path soon fades into a meadow thick with tall grass and wildflowers. Red winged blackbirds sing from a reed filled hollow and a woodcock erupts from the ground, startling them into laughter.

They arrive at the stream's edge; the clear water rushes over colorful stones of jasper, chert and milky quartz. The sound is mesmerizing and she turns to him. "Let's eat lunch here—it's not too early, is it?"

Together they tamp down the grass and spread a small blanket. Gwen takes two paper bags out of her rucksack and hands one to Henry. "There you go sir, fuel to take more pictures." She can't finish her sandwich and offers it to him. He takes it, and only when he's done eating does she speak again. "Listen to the water—isn't it beautiful here?"

"Yeah, I like the country."

"Henry?" She pauses a few seconds until he meets her eyes; her heart begins to thump. "You know I'm your friend, that I'd only want to help you, right?" He nods, looking unsure, waiting for her to continue. "You've got a problem and you

need to get past it. It's like if there was a damn of sticks and mud plugging up that stream and everything was flooding behind it, and you'd have to blast that damn out of there, right? To get things flowing again. You had an accident—it wasn't your fault—you hurt your head, your leg. You did have a wife—her name was Audrey—but she didn't make it, she died in that accident. She died and she's not coming back.”

The lines in his face freeze into a question mark of disbelief and fear. “No, we got separated somehow—I just haven't found her yet.”

“Henry, it's been over ten years. You need to accept it. I know it's painful, but tragic things happen. Remember you told me about your favorite cat, Mits? He died—you know that. It's sad, I know, but it happens. Just like your accident happened.”

He tries to get up but Gwen grabs his arm. “Listen, Henry, listen to those birds. Do you hear that truck out there, shifting gears? Do you see me sitting here? It's all real, just like what I told you is real.”

Lurching off the ground, he tears loose from her grip. “You lie,” he yells, and from his dark eyes an ugly torrent of debris rushes toward her. He grabs her wrists and yanks her off the ground. “You're lying,” he shouts, shaking her hard.

She winces in pain, pleading, “No, you've got to believe me. She's not coming back, she's dead. It's the truth.”

“They lied to me too, they told me she died. But I remember her, I remember—”

“The train, Henry? You remember the train? Your car got hit by that train, but it wasn’t your fault—the crossing had no lights, no barriers—you just got distracted or something. It hit on her side and she died instantly. You had to drop out of medical school and he got you this job—the man at the courthouse—he finally told me after I showed him the news clip . . . Ow! You’re hurting me, please let go, please.”

He releases her and turns away. Limping over to the stream, he sinks to his knees. The water gurgles peacefully over the stones, the birds continue to sing and he slumps further toward the ground, his face buried within his hands.

She knells beside him. He’s crying and the world is a hard place but hasn’t he suffered enough? She rubs his back, his shoulders and then she says softly, “I’m sorry, Henry—don’t be angry with me.” He remains still as her hands caress him, and then she lays her head on his back, grasping his shoulders, telling him, “Let’s go home now. I’ll buy us some Cokes in town—it’s been a long day.”

* * *

Gwen sits on a bench in front of the Catholic church, shivering inside a long, flowered dress and a thin jacket. She clasps her arms about herself and listens to the muted hum of an organ.

She wanted to sit with him inside, but couldn't bring herself to ask him yesterday—he was so distant. He just wanted to go home. Upon arriving, she stood in his doorway but was not invited in—though she ached to stay with him, to sleep with and hold him and in the morning make love to him.

The double doors swing open, organ music floods the yard and she stands, watching intently. The locals file out, some chatting, some eyeing her as she moves closer, clutching her purse in both hands. The crowd blooms around her, then thins. The stream of people coming from the doorway stops and she squeezes her purse tighter. Finally he appears, exiting with his head down. She rushes forward.

“Henry.” He looks up and smiles half-heartedly.

“Good morning, Gwen.”

“Hope you don't mind me coming—I wanted to walk with you.”

He shakes his head but doesn't look at her.

“Like my outfit? I wore it just for you.”

“You look pretty in it,” he replies, glancing at her.

“You look nice, too.” She smiles, trying to be upbeat despite her anxious heart—unsure if she should ask now or wait. But she worried about him all last night and hated to be alone and the days are racing by.

The birds sound nice and the sun feels good on her back—

it's such a beautiful morning and a shame they can't forget about the past and just enjoy the day. He's so quiet. She waits until they are well away from the others. Her heart begins to pound.

"I came this morning because we kind of left things hanging yesterday—I wasn't sure if you wanted to see me again."

"I was upset at what you said."

"I know you were—it was upsetting, but did you—Henry stop, look at me." He turns to face her and she takes a deep breath. "But did you believe me?"

"I don't want to talk about it." He begins walking away and she should just let it go and give him some space but she can't, she has to know. She hurries to his side.

"Okay, I understand that, but I have to ask you something." She takes his hand, forcing him to stop. "I—I just need to know if we're still friends."

He nods and finally offers her a big smile. "Of course. I like you a lot—I just need to be alone for awhile."

"I like you too—I'm glad we're still friends. Can I call you Wednesday night? We have a lot of film to develop and I know they're going to turn out neat and—"

"Maybe this week end."

"Oh, well—okay I guess. I'm just anxious to see the

pictures and I uh—I'll miss being with you—that's all." She grasps his arms, stretches up on her toes and kisses his cheek. "See you soon, Henry."

She quickly turns and walks away and he must know six days is a long time and she doesn't have a lot of time—and then he used the word maybe. Sure she's being a bit selfish, but what's desire if it isn't selfish?

Her shoes scuff rapidly along the sidewalk and she wishes it was rainy, but it's going to be a beautiful spring day and she'll be alone. A townie couple approaches saying hello and she barely acknowledges them before they pass behind her. She spies a paper bag in the gutter with trash spilling out and her mood brightens. Wednesday is garbage pick-up day. She'll have coffee and a big hug waiting for him. She lifts her face to the sun and smiles; the birds are singing again.

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Raindrops smack off the Catalina, signaling another downpour. Coreen shifts into neutral, slows to a stop and turns to Gwen. "They sure screwed up today's forecast. Your grass will be getting too high to mow."

But Gwen doesn't care about grass. "Why did the women give me the cold shoulder today? It was like they didn't even want me to be there?"

"Oh, I don't know if that's the case," she replies, killing

the engine, the wipers frozen in mid-wipe.

“Come on, you had to notice?”

“They’re not bad people. They can be a bit judgmental about certain things, you know, that are different from what they’re used to.”

“What are you talking about? What things?”

“Well, if I have to spell it out—you being seen with Henry.”

“Is that all they can gossip about? It’s none of their damn concern.” Stupid townies. Rain cascades down the windshield, distorting Main Street. “Let me ask you this—is it illegal to have a friend here?”

“Gwen, really now. You can’t be so naïve—you’re married, your husband is out of town. This isn’t Saint Louis—people notice.”

Her back stiffens and she stares at a wiper blade.

“Sometimes I feel like I don’t belong anywhere.”

“Tell me, do you even miss Tim?”

She shoots her an indignant look, then turns back to the windshield. She sighs, her long exhalation adding haze to the cool glass. “I know you all think he’s amazing, but I’ve lived with him now for seven years and I’m very conflicted. He’s got this neat little cubbyhole he wants me to stay in. Meanwhile he moves from one failed scheme to the next—why do you think

we had to move into his mother's house?"

"It's not so bad here. I bet his new venture will succeed."

"Yeah? What about my dreams?"

"What do you dream about?"

"I, well I—oh it doesn't matter. I better go—sorry to dump my personal troubles on you."

"Gwen, wait."

She releases the door handle. "Yeah?"

"I wasn't going to mention this—I thought you might know something but apparently not—because it's just a rumor and—"

"Mention what?"

"Henry might've gotten himself fired."

Gwen's mouth hangs open. "What? Who told you this?"

"I rather not say, but it was just before our meeting started. One of the ladies—she told me it was something about taking the truck again, off route, without permission."

"Oh no—he's finished without that job. He never did stop to pick up my trash yesterday, so I called him and he told me he just wasn't feeling well. This isn't good—you've got to drive me to his place—please?"

"I'd rather not get in the middle of this."

"It's just a ride?"

"I'm sorry," she says, cringing. "I hope you can

understand.”

Gwen turns away and shoves the heavy door out. Hunched over against the downpour, she shuts it without a goodbye, jogs to her stoop and then fishes about in her purse for the key.

* * *

Gwen raps hard on the front door to Henry’s house. A tall, large boned woman in her fifties answers.

“Oh, hi. You must be Missus Bauer—I’m here to see Henry.”

“Who are you? Are you this Gwen?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Well I’m his landlady, and I watch out for him see, and you have caused a lot of troubles for him. He gets fired on Tuesday, won’t eat any food and now I don’t know where he is. He was fine before, and now you come along and cause all this trouble. Why don’t you leave him alone, go back where you came from? Go.”

“Well I am sorry about all that, but he’s my friend and I need to— ”

“Get off my porch.”

“Henry,” she yells past the lady’s head, “Henry.”

“He’s not here I said, now leave or I call the police.”

Stepping off the landing, the loud din of another downpour fills her ears—her head buried within the hood of a cheap vinyl

raincoat.

* * *

Gwen takes another sip of cold coffee as she dusts the empty bookshelf, her tiny radio blaring rock and roll songs from the kitchen table. Checking her watch—one, one thirty, now two—she has to do it soon or it'll be quitting time and then the weekend. Henry's phone just rings but she can't wait any longer. She drops her dust rag and skips upstairs to change.

She stares at the skirt and blouse lying on her bed and sighs. Returning to the closet, she pulls out a black pencil dress, wiggles it over her body and then heads for the bathroom.

After washing her face, she spreads cosmetics out on a piece of cardboard spanning the pedestal sink. She quickly rubs in foundation, sweeps some powder on and then tosses the brush down, searching for the bronze eye shadow. Rushing, she smudges her eyeliner, holding the pencil so tight her hand shakes—and damn these townies, they're really starting to piss her off. Applying ruby red lipstick to match her nails, she touches her throat with perfume, steps into a pair of pumps and immediately leaves the house.

* * *

“Right down that hall, ma'am. First door on the right.”

Her shoes click rapidly toward the supervisor's office. In accordance with her new persona, she steps right through the

doorway, stops and then smiles. “Hello sir, I’m Gwen Schmidt—your city’s newest resident.”

He pauses by a filing cabinet, looking a bit taken aback, but then smiles, detours around his desk and shakes her hand. “Well hello. George Larson. Nice to meet you and welcome to Cassburg. What brings you into the highway building on such a nice day?”

“A nice day in a very attractive city, I might add. Everything is kept so clean and soon we’ll have flowers along Main Street.”

“That’s right—are you part of the Homemakers?”

“Uh-huh, I’m one of them. Anyway, I know you’re busy but I was hoping to discuss a personal matter with you.”

“All right.” He steps past her to close the door, then drags a chair over in front of his desk. “Please, sit down.”

“Um, could I sit closer—so I won’t have to talk so loud all the way across that big desk?” His Nordic frame towers over her as he nods, a quizzical smile on his lips. He moves the chair in front of his and they sit, facing each other. She crosses her leg and coyly pulls down the hem of her dress.

“Sadly,” she begins, speaking low, “it’s come to my attention that a good and decent man, Henry DeGroff—an employee of yours—has recently been fired. Is that true?”

He sits back. “Yes.”

“And that was because he took his truck off route for a while?”

“Ma’am, I can’t really discuss this with you. What exactly did you come here for?”

She feels the walls rise and her underarms sting with heat. “Well ya see, I’ve become acquainted with Henry these past few weeks and I’m here to speak on his behalf—he’s very distraught over this and I know he’s sorry. Is there any way you could give him a second chance?”

“I don’t think so, Missus Schmidt.”

His face rigid, he offers nothing and she bites her lip. “Please?” she asks in a pitiful voice, “he’s such a good worker, so courteous and—”

“I’ve got things to do before five, ma’am, so if you’ll excuse me. But it was nice meeting you.”

He leans forward to rise and heat flashes up through her neck and into her face. She’s losing him. “Mister Larson,” she says sharply, “I’d like to negotiate this.”

“How so,” he says, his eyes narrowed.

She shifts her behind and takes a deep breath. “You know—I offer you something and I get offered something in return, and if we agree, it’s a deal.” She smiles stiffly, rubbing her thumb back and forth over her purse’s clasp—all pretense of a professional exchange quickly eroding.

He studies her for a moment as she struggles to control her breath—though her composure hardly matters now. His eyes dart to her legs for a fraction of a second and then he leans closer.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Is there a private place we can go to, close by?” She presses her purse hard into her lap, suddenly dizzy. His face turns red, she holds her breath and then he nods.

* * *

Gwen exits the graceless equipment barn through a back door. She blinks in the bright sunlight, struggling over loose gravel as she makes her way toward the street. She was lucky to use the restroom he was so anxious to push her out—but she has Henry’s job back.

Reaching the sidewalk, she checks her watch and then glances down the street, trying to forget what just happened, trying to be positive and strong and beat back the coming darkness, but the sickening shroud descends over her. Rummaging in her purse, she finds the slip of paper he wrote his phone number on and stares at it. She made him write it out even though she memorized it within seconds. She lifts her head, her jaw clenched, determined to find him. She’ll beg forgiveness, then slip within his arms to be held tight and everything will brighten. Placing the paper back in her purse,

she clasps it shut, swings the strap up on her shoulder and strides forward.

Wandering the streets on the south side of town, she asks pedestrians if they've seen Henry the garbage man, the man with the limp. But nobody has and it's now five thirty. She remembers the Esso station and the payphone on the corner.

Ding-ding, ding-ding—another car rolls in for gas as she enters the booth. She clicks her dime into the slot and dials the four digits. Sitting on the triangular seat, she removes her shoes and rubs her feet, staring out the dirty glass. She hangs up after ten rings and the dime tumbles into the coin return. Snatching it out, she slips back into her shoes and opens the door. A train horn wails in the distance as her eyes scan the streets. Where is he?

She continues searching for another hour and then decides to head for his house. That landlady was a real bitch but maybe he'll be home or at least she can hide nearby and watch for him.

Crossing a familiar intersection, she hears the muffled thump of music and stares at the sign—it's Ash Street. She turns left and peers down the hill: the bar's rutted parking lot contains a few cars and out in front sit a line of motorcycles. There'll be a payphone inside.

She passes the row of shiny Harleys and turns into the open doorway, entering a small vestibule. "Shoot." No phone

here. Heads turn as she walks to the bar and stands between leather jackets in the only open spot. Waving smoke from her face, she stares as the bartender prepares a drink—avoiding eye contact with the patrons and ignoring a base remark made from one of the tables.

“Never mind them jerks,” the guy next to her says, leaning in way too close, “they don’t know nothing about real ladies.” His beard is some half-ass thing and he reeks of beer.

“And I suppose you do?”

“Enough to be polite and offer you a drink.”

“No thanks,” she says, quickly turning away. She feels his breath in her ear.

“That’s not too friendly for somebody coming in here gussied up like a whore.”

She slaps his face just as a song ends on the jukebox. “Get away from me!” The guy rubs his jaw, stunned, then slinks away to snickers of laughter.

“Bartender,” she snaps, “do you have a payphone I can use?”

She strides down a dim hallway under some crude restroom signs and sees the wall phone. Her dime tinkles inside as she waits for the hum. She dials and his phone starts ringing. Come on, come on—pick up. She slams the hand piece on the cradle and sighs. A faint strip of light shines at the end of the

hallway—it's an exit door and she's definitely not walking past those idiots again. She sweeps it open and steps outside, inhaling a lungful of fresh air before her body gets jerked back, a hand crushed tight over her mouth.

* * *

“I knew you'd sneak out this way, miss smarty pants.”

He drags her behind a dumpster as she groans into his hand. She throws her fingers back trying to scratch his eyes and pull his hair until she feels a blade against her throat. Dropping her arms and breathing hard through her nose, she's forced to smell his boozy breath.

“I wouldn't scream if I were you.” A cold wave of fear pulses through her as his hand drops from her mouth, sweeps over her breast and belly and then pauses between her legs. He gathers her dress up and she tenses, bracing herself, and then he penetrates her with his finger. She cringes as he asks disgusting questions—the knife forcing her to nod that yes, she does enjoy it, that she regrets slapping him when he only wanted to buy her a drink. As soon as she feels the knife withdraw she jerks around, claws barred like a wildcat, and rakes his face. He slams the side of her head with his hand, knocking her against the dumpster with a bang.

Muffled music drifts in and out of her consciousness, then the sharp pain from her jaw. Her eyes flutter open. Darkness

has fallen and for a moment she simply breathes, her mind numb, her lower legs resting in grit and bits of broken glass. Staring at a black object several feet away, she slowly crawls toward it—it's her shoe.

Drifting along the side of the bar, opening and closing her aching jaw, she reaches what's left of the sidewalk. She looks west and imagines listening to her peaceful stream—but it's dark out and too far and she needs to go home. Shivering in the cool air, she rubs her arms, then turns and walks back up the hill.

As she nears downtown, the headlights of a vehicle strike her body from behind. Glancing back, her heart begins to pound. The pickup pulls away from the curb and begins trailing her. She hurries toward the lights of Main Street, just ahead.

“Hey whore,” a man yells as the truck passes, “you want a good time?” and then a paper bag hits the walk in front of her, scattering beer cans and bottles across her feet.

Once home she bolts the door and runs upstairs, her pumps echoing throughout the dark, empty house. Stumbling near the top, she kicks them off and enters the bathroom. The fluorescent light flickers on and she stares at her filthy dress, her bruised and cut legs. She swallows several aspirin, then twists the water valves open to fill the tub.

After taping sheets over her bedroom windows, she turns

on the light, flops onto her mattress and stares at the walls—such an ugly room—not her room, not her house, not herself. “I wish I were dead,” she whispers, and the beauty she sees in the world vanishes, replaced by a dull ache inside her heart.

* * *

Feeling detached, almost floating, Gwen checks for traffic and then crosses Main Street. Her entire body is sore and she needs coffee. Her camera is strapped about her neck but she keeps her head down, watching sections of concrete pass under her feet.

Entering the Red and White, she nods to the woman cashier, then goes about picking up her grocery items and dropping them into a canvas bag. Hearing something, she looks at the high, tin-tiled ceiling; a wren is flying about, bumping into walls, trying to get out.

“I don’t know how them birds get in here,” the woman says as Gwen approaches. “Got everything you need, dear?”

“Yes, thank you,” she replies, setting her items out on the countertop.

“That will be three forty-two.” Gwen hands her a five and the drawer rings open. The woman gives her the change and then says, “That’s so sad what happened to the garbage man.”

Her head snaps up and her eyes lock onto the woman’s face. “What? You mean Henry? I’m sure he’ll get his job back.”

“Job back? No, don’t think so. They found him yesterday beside the railroad tracks, all mangled up—the train knocked him good.”

A stabbing pain shoots through her chest and grabs at her throat and she stammers, “Well, well that just can’t be—I just spoke with him on—are you sure it’s Henry?”

“Yeah, the sheriffs confirmed the identity in their report. It’s right here in the paper.” She takes a newspaper off the pile and points to the front page. “See, right here.”

Gwen reads the short article and then starts throwing the food back into her bag.

“Did you know him?” the woman asks stupidly, almost in disbelief.

She rubs the tears from her face and looks the townie square in the eyes. “Yes, we were friends.” She grabs her bag and strides out the screen door, letting it slam shut.

Just past the five and dime she hurries into the alley. Dropping her bag, she holds her hand to her mouth and bends over to retch. Suddenly weak, she leans against the brick wall but her knees give out and she slumps down among the weeds. “Oh Henry,” she calls out as painful sobs begin to shake in her chest, “Why? Why?”

Pausing to dab her eyes, she hears a tiny cry. The bag has tipped over, spilling some items, and the calico cat and her

kittens are pawing at a package of chicken salad. She raises the camera to her eye, focuses, and snaps the shutter. The cats freeze but do not run, and then the mother strolls over, purring, and rubs against Gwen's outstretched hand.

Tomorrow, a Sunday, she'll stuff her rucksack full of essentials. She'll cut her hair short and write a note onto the little pad. Monday morning, before daybreak, she'll tape the remaining cash to her thigh, sneak over to the rail yard and pray for an empty boxcar. Swinging her gear up onto the decking, she'll climb aboard and wait for the train to pull away.