

Who it is

When it first happened, it confused me. I must have searched the yard for thirty minutes, trying to look scared in case someone was watching.

When it happened again, it turned me on. The sky was a single gray and domed, and I could feel it pushing against the space beyond, the way a coddled child resists a parent. Despite the bigness of the sky, though, I still felt somehow captured. I watched Franklin do his business, heard the phone ring and went to answer it, talked to Rachel briefly, and when I came back outside, Franklin's business was gone. No barking, either. As I said, I searched the yard extensively, scanning with my steps - toe to heel, one after the next - like a ground search for a missing person. But I found nothing. No sign of his business.

It was sexy but still surprising. Sexy *because* it was surprising. After all, Franklin doesn't eat his own shit.

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One of my patients, Stella, a girl wiser than her years, is the one who taught me the difference between niceness and kindness. Kind, she says, is acting virtuously, morally, or in faith to your values. Nice, she says, is whether or not you're smiling when you do it. Stella knows about my secret admirer - so much for patient-therapist boundaries - and we agreed that it was an odd but kind thing to do, for someone to pick up Franklin's business, even if it meant trespassing. Some weird show of affection by someone who probably didn't know how to express it otherwise. Probably someone not quite adjusted to society. Someone just a little bit desperate in their own way.

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“Yes, I’m certain,” I explained to Rachel over the phone. “No one has come to cut the lawn. There’s never anything in the lawn. No animals, nothing.” I looked out at my empty and uncut grass. “Sweetie, I’ve thought of these things.”

“What about Franklin?” she asked.

“I don’t think he ate it,” I said, staying patient despite her matriarchal tone, a tone reserved for children and the senile. “He’s never been a poop-eater, though I know some dogs *do* do that.”

“Ew, mom,” is how she responded.

“What’s gross about it?” I said. “You used to pick up Franklin’s business, too.”

“Yeah, mom, I’m actually less concerned about your obsession with Franklin’s shit, and more concerned that someone probably broke into your yard.”

I couldn’t hold in a fake laugh, though I knew she was right.

“Why would someone break into my yard to steal Franklin’s business?”

“That’s what’s creepy, mom.” Rachel condescended. “And it’s just you in the house. You remember the -”

“You’re anxious, honey,” I interrupted, trying to stunt her lecture.

“Yeah, mom,” she snapped, “turns out, there *are* things that warrant anxiety. You remember what happened last year?”

As my daughter recounted our neighborhood urban legend, covering every absurd and violent detail, I filled a palm with pills and returned all but two to the orange prescription vial.

“They never even caught the guy, mom,” she almost whimpered.

“You’re anxious, honey,” I repeated, then swallowed the pills with a gulp of water and prepared for more exposition.

“Mom,” she pleaded, “Do I need to come home and watch you? Just call the cops. Let them handle it.”

“Sweetie,” I reassured her, “life is a participatory event.” I realized that she wasn’t ready for the rest of the story. “So participate.”

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Each time since that first time, Franklin’s business has disappeared. It’s been three weeks. None of his bowel movements have stayed untouched longer than 24 hours. After the first time, I shrugged. I must have decided it was just easier not to think about the *how* or the *why*. But the next time Franklin went, it vanished again. And the third time. And the fourth.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t alert at the beginning. Rachel wasn’t altogether wrong: someone was clearly breaking into my yard, and it’s just me in this house now.

But two Sundays ago, on a lonely afternoon, I felt an urge to meet my admirer. I walked the block with Franklin and a roll of poop bags, picking up other dogs’ business that their owners had left. With full bags swinging from both hands, I hurried home and planted about a dozen crusty little turds around my backyard. I could at least confirm that the mystery was man made. That there wasn’t some feces-eating bird flying away with Franklin’s turds. That my pug’s vanishing business wasn’t a fluke. As I spread the neighborhood’s dogs’ business around the yard, even Franklin looked at me skeptically, but then seemed content, trotting from pile to pile, sniffing, licking some and marking others.

That evening, I cooked dinner with the back door open, a big oak door. I kept an eye on the yard, but it was silent and still. Nothing more than raisin-shaped house flies showed up in the yard, auditing all of the new excrement.

I went to sleep that night a bit disappointed. But the next morning, when I strolled the yard with Franklin, every single pile was gone. Franklin wandered apathetically, but I felt a wash of adolescent excitement, giddy from an expectation fulfilled, like a teenager asked to dance.

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Stella told me something interesting during last week's session. She's a narrow, pale, freckled teenager, but beautiful, with long hair the color and shine of a new penny. She's almost certainly on the spectrum, and maybe more than one. Autistic and perhaps bipolar, I mean. The boys her age don't understand her. I think they're probably intimidated by her intellect and straight-forwardness. Her honesty. She's very much like I was at her age.

Stella told me she was laying out at the park last week, sunbathing in a crop top and her swimsuit - her bikini, she said - when a homeless man with a tangled gray beard wheeled his cart towards her. She tried to focus on her book but felt him watching. He walked slowly towards her, staring at her, and when he got to about twenty-five feet away, he stopped. He stood, still as a pole, gaping at her. She said she could feel him linger.

For the record, my girls would've had the police on him at fifty *yards*, forget twenty-five feet. But they're suburban girls and Stella's a city girl. Young? Yes. But naive? No.

Stella said that the man just stood slightly out of reach and watched her, unmoving, for what she thought to be four or five minutes.

“Was he touching himself?” I asked her.

“No, just standing.” Stella has trouble emoting. It’s hard to tell exactly how she’s feeling about things, so you have to listen. “His arms were at his sides,” she said.

I set my notebook down on the table next to me, then capped my pen and laid it on the notebook. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“You went back to reading your book?”

“No,” she said, staring at the carpet between us. “This is why I wanted to bring it up with you.” Here she looked patiently at her bony knees. “I liked it,” she said, then raised her head again. “When I knew he wasn’t going anywhere, I pulled my shirt up - the bottom of my shirt - and tied it into a knot just beneath my... chest.”

I could tell she didn’t know what to call her breasts around me. “Was anyone else around?” I asked.

“No, not until another man came at the end and shoed him away.”

“How long did you let him look?”

“I don’t know,” Stella continued. She grabbed a pillow from the couch in my office and hugged it. “But that wasn’t it.”

I stared at her.

“I mean,” she said, “I didn’t just tie my shirt up. When I realized he was gawking, I shook my hair out. And I pulled down my bikini bottoms from both sides.” Stella’s voice

cast a vaguely prideful shadow. “And then I pulled them down - my bikini bottoms - a little bit more, but from the inside of my legs, the crease between my legs and my crotch. But not in a hurried way,” she was quick to clear up. “I made sure to move my hands slowly. So that he would keep watching.”

I crossed my hands on my lap and felt a small rush, from the novelty of the conversation, yes, but also from Stella’s purity, and her fresh sensuality that threatened it.

“Far enough to show the start of my pubic hair,” she continued, now with an extended index finger. “And before I brought my hands up, I slid my finger slowly up, over the center of my bikini.”

“Your bikini bottoms?” I clarified. “As in erotically?”

She did a small nod.

“Were you looking at him while you did that?” I asked. “Making eye contact?”

“No. But I could tell he knew. *He* knew that *I* knew he was watching.”

I crossed my legs, hands still overlapped, and stared at her. Stella was, to some degree, reliving the heat. Her cheeks were flushed and she spoke more quickly.

“When I knew I had his attention, I sat up and put another layer of sunscreen on. I untied the knot in my shirt and took it off. I put sunscreen on my shoulders, then slipped the straps of my bra off my shoulders. I rubbed more lotion on myself...on my chest.”

Now I couldn’t tell if she was prideful or ashamed.

“I showed him pretty much everything,” she said with some finality, then set the pillow next to her, clasped her hands, and waited.

I looked at Stella's chest, then at her cheeks and eyes, and then her hair. "You basked in it," I sort of asked.

She locked eyes with me again. "The sun and more...yeah."

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"I'm wearing heels now," I said, grinning into the phone, "when I go to pick up Franklin's business." Rachel was speechless on the other end, so I went on. "I've been wearing my sun dresses and just a little bit of summer lipstick, too."

"Mom -," she said with despair. It was as if she knew I was floating up and away, and she was lunging one last time for my ankle. But I was out of reach.

"I can't say that I feel him watching, but I think he might be. I wouldn't doubt it, at least. And yes, I do think it's a him."

"Mom, are you okay?" my daughter asked.

"I'm fine, sweetie. It's kind of nice, you know, having someone doing something kind for me, without an agenda."

"What makes you think there's no agenda?"

"Don't be so cynical. Isn't it kind of exciting to you?"

"No!" she cried. "It's sick, mom!"

"I want to see how far he'll go," I said, leaning from my chair to peak at the back yard.

"What? Why? ...," she asked. "What does that even mean?"

"I think it's his fetish, honey." The yard was still undisturbed. "I feel seductive."

"Jesus Christ! This is how women get raped and killed."

“By seducing men with their dogs’ shit?” I had to laugh. Not because she was wrong but because of her youth.

“You know what I mean, mom.” Her voice had lost its former fury and was now thin and fearful. “Please.”

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Curiosity got the best of me, and I tried to bait him. My stalker - my admirer. With a plastic bag I moved Franklin’s business closer to my house. I left it just off of the sidewalk and as close to the base of my back steps as possible.

Inside, I waited in the back room, peeking through a slit in the curtains I’d drawn, through the sunroom and out into the yard. I wondered if Rachel might be concerned enough to fly in and check on me. How had she become so different? Always hypervigilant. Always fixated on the potential catastrophe. I watched and waited for about an hour, then ran out of patience and gave up.

But the next morning, as sure as the sunrise, the bait was gone, taken. And this time something was left behind. As I was climbing my worn and paint-chipped steps, frustrated, I noticed a single paper towel, crinkled as if it had fallen out of a pocket. It sat lightly on the second step from the sidewalk. Before I bent down, I looked around. At the yard. Towards my eye-high back gate and tired garage. At the sleepy sky. But they all sort of blended together now. Everything was as it had been for years. Nothing out of place. Nothing to note.

I bent over, feeling watched, and pinched just enough of a corner of the balled paper to hold it up. There was a whiff of cleaning solvent, and I could see small streaks of fecal

residue in its creases. I urged Franklin inside, locked the door, and threw the paper towel in the trash.

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It was three nights ago, while I was in my nightgown under the covers, when Franklin started to bark. He doesn't do that often, and it's even rarer that he runs downstairs to inspect. My heart was racing, but I slid out of bed and followed him, walking as noiselessly as I know how. I felt like a kid again, scared, irrational, and insecure. Like when I would creep down to my foster home's concrete-floored basement, where the laundry was, and try not to disturb the monsters as I rushed to load the washing machine. When I got to the back door, Franklin was barking - screaming in his own way - like he never had before. The motion-sensored light was shining down on the empty porch. Not only was Franklin's business gone from the top step, where I'd planted it, but the spot where it had been seemed to have been cleaned. There was a dirtless spot in its place that looked to have been scrubbed, and the smell of bleach hovered over the steps. It was the scent of bleach in the dark that shook me, and I understood, for the first time in the ordeal, that Rachel was right.

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Two days ago, I had my session with Stella. I didn't charge her for the session because she asked more questions about me than I did her.

"Bleach?" she asked.

"Mhm," I mumbled, long past professionalism.

"Do you think it's a fetish or something?"

“I think it might be.” My voice was flat, but my fingers danced. I couldn’t stop rubbing the smooth nail of my thumb with the tip of my index finger. I’d started this tick when I first realized my marriage was doomed.

“Like voyeurism?” Stella asked.

“Well, it could be. And there are cleaning fetishes - you know, the maid outfits and such - which involve a power dynamic. I looked it up, though, and there’s one other, called coprophilia, which is arousal from feces.”

Stella is mature for her age, but I began to feel uncomfortable. It was a conversation that I knew I shouldn’t be having with *any* patient, let alone a teenager. Teaching them what coprophilia is. Discussing someone stalking me. Discussing how or why I might like it. But wasn’t that why we were so close? We didn’t judge each other the way our families did.

“Did your husband ever do anything like this?” Stella asked.

“No.” I said and couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of the thought. “He would pick up Franklin’s business, but I don’t think he got off on it. He got off on normal things.”

Stella didn’t move. “Do you feel safe?”

I had to think for a moment. It was an obvious question that I hadn’t really taken time to consider. “I don’t feel especially safe or unsafe,” I lied.

She contemplated the situation. Maybe she was thinking through her own boundaries, wondering just how far she would’ve taken her experience in the park, with the homeless man.

“And he’s been on your porch...” she repeated.

I nodded.

“But not in your house, right?”

I understood where the conversation was headed.

“What are you going to do next?” she asked.

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Last night, I kept the spring-loaded, flimsy door to the sunroom unlocked. As the sun was setting, I brought Franklin’s latest business into the sunroom - its air wet and convected - and set the poop on the doormat at the base of the house’s back door. How ridiculous was this? And how had it come to this, playing with Franklin’s shit to seduce a stalker?

I pushed the oak door shut and kept pushing for a moment with my whole body, twisted the lock in its knob and rattled the handle, then rotated the deadbolt. On my tip-toes, I looked out through the glass triangles towards the top of my backdoor. The yard was silent and empty. I turned off the lights in the kitchen, and went to bed, feeling every creak and moan of the house in my gut.

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At 3:34am, things began as they had the night prior. Franklin bowling downstairs, sprinting at the back door, shrieking. Me putting my running shoes on and following him down, surprised and terrified to be creeping around my own house. My heart was racing again. In the kitchen, the faint green light of the appliances struggled. I grabbed a knife and snuck to the back door in a crouch.

Franklin’s business had been removed from my sunroom. Again, the spot where I had left it looked clean, and after I found the courage to open my back door, there was the same miasma of cleaning solution. Only this time, the smell wasn’t quite recognizable. The

odor wasn't quite bleach, nor any other solution I recognized. I wasn't sure what it was, and my mind wandered first to horror tropes, then to the urban legend Rachel had reminded me of. The intrusion. The formaldehyde. The irresolution.

And then just before I came inside, I'm sure I saw, standing next to my garage in the darkness, his silhouette. I kicked Franklin back inside, slammed the back door, and locked it twice. I grabbed my phone, ready to call Rachel, ready to call the police, and I heard the crash of felled trash bins in the alley. After several minutes of paralysis and deep breathing, I pocketed my phone and went to bed, making sure Franklin never left my side.

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Tonight my heart punches my rib cage and my breath won't level. I'm stiff and in bed. I'm wearing not only my nightgown and running shoes, but my yoga tights as well. I'm trying to understand the whole situation, trying to understand what's actually happening here, to me and to Stella and to Rachel.

I'm petrified. I can't move, bound to my bed.

I want to go close and lock the door, but I won't. I need to pee, but I won't.

I don't know what's wrong, what's wrong with me. Each breath finishes with the stink of Franklin's shit. How is this my life now? That miserable greed for experience. That unbearable boredom put me here.

Stella has her parents. Rachel has her husband. I stare down to Franklin at the foot of my bed. All he returns is tumescence and wheezy dreaming.

The sun has been down for awhile. There's only darkness outside my window and the ambient noise of the city is half of what it was two hours ago.

It feels so wrong - off - to wear shoes in bed, under the covers.

A pile of Franklin's shit is sinking into the carpet outside of my bedroom door. The back door of my house is completely unlocked. I even left it cracked.

I think I hear the thud of footsteps in the house. I think I hear breathing. But still nothing.

The game is no longer fun.

I smell bleach.

I'm alone and shaking, wondering who it was. Who it is.