

ODOR

He passed on the chance to go to Denmark because people were always saying how rotten things were there. They were her relatives, anyway. She took it in stride which was one of the reasons he was attracted to her in the first place. Being European, she didn't make a fuss, didn't throw dishes or withhold sex. His friends had teased him when he married Eva, but they were jealous. Eva was different from their wives, much more natural in her unique brand of beauty, the type that wasn't dictated by Hollywood. Her hair was unattractively short, clinging on either side of a wide face that reminded him of a desolate beach. Her blue eyes, if they were darker, would be the shade of the Caribbean. She refused to artificially straighten or whiten her teeth and wore next to no makeup. She preferred spandex in her clothes for the way they clung to her ample frame in a way she thought was sexy. Her full figure was solid, nothing jiggling when she passed his friends on her way to the refrigerator for the wine bottle. He could tell from the way their eyes followed her that they liked the imperfections and given an opportunity, they'd spend an afternoon making love to them.

He sensed her relief when he refused to travel to her native Denmark and in time, suspected that was the reason she chose it. She hadn't been back there since coming to New York some ten years ago. He remembered her telling him on one of their first dates that she never wanted to go back. He remembered this because, at the time, he was relieved. The last thing he needed was a passport.

Dimitri asked what he planned on doing while Eva was away. After all, it was his vacation, too, and Dimitri didn't understand the finer nuances of marriage. Why didn't he pick up and go to the

Bahamas or Mexico, the friend suggested. But Nez wasn't in the mood to travel. If he was, he'd be accompanying Eva. Besides, he didn't want to tell Dimitri he still didn't have a passport. He thought it a shame he needed one now to spend a few days relaxing on some expensive beach that the island's own natives couldn't afford. But he said he had no plans except to sleep late and eat a lot of takeout. Eva wasn't much for fast food. She enjoyed cooking and was pretty good at it only he didn't like the dishes she made. Their odors lingered in their small East Village apartment long after they were consumed, mainly by her, or thrown in the trash, mainly by him.

As the time drew nearer for her to leave, he was looking forward to introducing the three room apartment to more familiar odors: beef chow mein, pizza, meatball heroes, fried chicken. It had been a long time since he was greeted by something he liked when he opened the door. Not to say that he didn't like Eva, didn't mind the fact that she never shaved or wore deodorant. Being European, she didn't see the need to mask odors that Americans found offensive.

He drove her and her luggage to the airport, wondering how she was going to manage two large suitcases. The airline would certainly charge her more for over packing. He suspected she bought a lot of gifts for the family she disowned and planned on buying just as many things to take back as souvenirs for him. He made it a point to tell her the only thing he wanted were those marijuana lollipops, but she laughed and told him he was thinking of Amsterdam. She was going to Copenhagen. Nez remembered how much he loved the movie with Danny Kaye playing Hans Christian Andersen. But then, just as Eva leaned forward to kiss his cheek, he thought how ugly Andersen was in real life, nowhere near as handsome as Danny Kaye, and that a man who could never hope to attract a woman into his bed should write stories that captivated children made him shudder. A minute later, Eva was wheeling her suitcases behind her, ass pumping to the left and right until it disappeared into the terminal.

They had been married a few years now and while he couldn't say that he was madly in love, he couldn't say that he wasn't. They didn't opt for a big wedding. After all, her family was in Denmark, his scattered along the East coast. They set a date, called in sick and went to City Hall. Later, he remarked that the train ride downtown was longer than the actual ceremony. She wasn't hard to live with, didn't get upset when he threw his dirty clothes on the floor or left the bathroom door open. She moved in with little fanfare, asking only for was a row of drawers and half a closet.

He did not go straight home after dropping her at the airport and felt a twinge of guilt that he didn't stay to watch her plane take off. But he knew he couldn't do that even if he wanted, that everyone must do their part to keep the skies safe and that glancing up at the sky on his way home to watch the planes lift their noses into the clouds was just as good.

For a Saturday in July, traffic was unusually light and since he rented the car for the weekend, he decided that he would take a drive. Of course, he decided this on his way back to the city and since he didn't have a map or GPS, he didn't know which highway to take and where that would lead him. He found he didn't have to think too much to find his way back to the East Village and to the bar where he usually went after work when he didn't feel like going straight home.

The place was cool, dark and smelled of a mixture of yeast from spilled beer and smoke absorbed into the walls from the years when it was perfectly acceptable to light up. Nez slid onto a stool and ordered a martini. He waited for his eyes to adjust and looked around for anyone he knew. It being only four in the afternoon, he didn't think he'd have much luck but then he remembered it was Saturday. Strange how one loses track of time while on vacation. He sipped his drink and longed for a cigarette but didn't feel like standing outside. He thought about buying a bottle of vodka and some vermouth and drinking at home, where it was light enough to read a book, but there was something wrong with starting the first day of vacation in the apartment. It would look like he was already missing Eva or worse, upset

that he hadn't gone with her and while neither of those scenarios were true, he thought it might be nice if they were.

He sat and thought about Eva, hoping her plane had taken off on time and that she was getting a good dinner onboard. She hadn't eaten much all day, packing at the last minute, telling him to stay out of the bedroom. He let her alone, hanging out in the kitchen, reading the paper and having coffee. He understood how nervous one gets when seeing family. These things are never easy. He took a shower, got himself a roll with butter at the corner deli and ate it in the park a few blocks away. He tried to concentrate on the fact that this was going to be the first time he'd be living alone, having shared space with roommates since he was in college. He wondered how it would feel to go to sleep and wake up in an empty apartment. He wasn't scared of being lonely, not enough to change his mind and follow Eva to Denmark. After an hour of thinking, Nez found he was looking forward to it, felt there had to be some time in a man's life when he was on his own.

Two martinis later, he was back on the street and heading for Chinese takeout. He felt loose, like his legs had separated from his hips and were moving independently of him. He realized he had hardly eaten anything outside the roll all day and that the drinks, while not that large, were enough to make him slightly drunk with nothing in his stomach to absorb them. He kept this fact tucked away for the time when he wanted to feel good fast without having to spend a lot of money at the bar.

A blast of hot air and steam greeted him as he walked into the tiny place. He passed the two tables used mainly for people to wait for their food. He couldn't imagine anyone wanting to eat in front of the shop's large front window, on display for everyone to see that eating in such a pathetic place was their idea of dining out. He circled the items he wanted on the menu and shoved the small pencil back into the plastic soup container filled with dirty rice, a makeshift pencil holder. He watched the young Chinaman, sweat beading on his forehead and upper lip, throw the ingredients into a hot wok and stir, stir,

stir, adding oil, soy sauce and broth as needed, steam rising, flames licking the bottom of the wok. Nez's stomach growled but the place was too noisy for anyone to hear. His mouth filled with saliva and the sweat was rolling south from under his arms, disappearing into the waistband of his pants. He was like a human waterfall. Pulling a ten from his wallet, he grabbed the bag of food and walked out.

Nez left the car where it was on the street, figuring it was best to walk a few blocks for it in the morning than spend another half hour looking for a parking spot. He turned into the vestibule of his building and stopped for the mail. He took the stairs, two at a time, to the third floor, fumbling for his keys. Excited, he pushed open the door and hesitated, savoring the moment. No sounds coming from the bedroom, no shower running, no voices from the adjoining apartment filtering through the thin walls, no footsteps from the woman upstairs walking the floor. Silence in all its heaviness hung in the air, drawing him in. He stepped inside and placed the bag on the kitchen table. In the distance, there was only the hum of traffic which he never knew he could hear until this moment. He felt like a baby, discovering something new in his small world.

He took a deep breath and exhaled, his nose picking up the faint trace of something foul. He sniffed again, bringing his face toward the bag of food, hoping it wasn't coming from there. He walked around the kitchen, stopping frequently to sniff. Opening the door to the cabinet under the sink, he peeked inside the pail and saw that it was full. Neither he nor Eva had emptied it before leaving. He pulled the garbage bag up and tied its ends into a knot, walking it down three flights and into the alley under the building where the garbage cans were. When he went back into the apartment, he sprayed the air with something that Eva bought to make everything smell like a pine forest but found that he couldn't eat his dinner surrounded by the smell of Christmas trees. He took the bag into the living room, eating quickly before the pine scent reached him.

Nez looked at the clock, surprised it was only nine. He gathered what remained of his food, enough for his lunch the following day, and put it in the refrigerator. Time didn't move as fast as he imagined but he guessed that was because the day had been centered on the ride to the airport and there wasn't much he could plan with that stuck in the middle of the afternoon. Tomorrow would be the real start to his vacation and he toyed with the idea of going for a drive upstate but then he'd have to get up early because the rental car had to be returned by six that evening. Heading for the shower, Nez decided that he would see what time his eyes opened on Sunday and plan his day accordingly.

He turned on the cold water and inched into the stream cascading from the shower head. His heart pounded against his chest momentarily, but soon welcomed the icy chill. He lathered and scrubbed first under his arms and then his groin, enjoying the sensation of touching himself. Watching the soap run between his legs, he tried to remember just when the last time he made love to Eva. Married couples often slip into this routine where the challenges of living together become more important than making love. He heard his friends talk about it all the time. But Eva was easy to get along with so he began to wonder just what it was that had kept them from making love. Giving it some serious thought, he realized that they had never been the type to screw at every opportunity. In fact, it had taken them a full six months of dating before she spent the night with him. He hadn't asked and she hadn't hinted. Their first time was more out of convenience than passion. They had come back from a friend's wedding and he was too tired to see her home. They dropped their clothes to the floor, slipped under the sheets and did some necessary groping before he slipped inside her. It was over quick and if he hadn't been so drunk, he might have felt embarrassed.

Nez patted himself dry, leaving his skin just damp enough to be cooled by a stray breeze coming from the open bedroom window. He pulled back the comforter and slipped under the thin sheet. Eva must be in Denmark by now. He forgot to ask her to call but things like that don't need to be stated

between a man and wife. Wife. The word still fascinated him. He didn't see himself as a husband. He wasn't even sure whose idea it was to marry, his or hers. But all his friends were married and it seemed like a good idea. He couldn't complain. He reached between his legs and stroked himself. He should have made love to Eva before she left. But he knew how to take care of these things himself, not like Dimitri who thought that once he was married he didn't have to jerk off. Nez came quickly and fell asleep.

Three days passed with only one text from Eva saying she had arrived safely and that she was enjoying becoming reacquainted with her family. In the interim, Nez found that the odor from the first night had returned. Or maybe, it never left. Maybe the pine scent only masked it. He checked the refrigerator and found that a few of the items had expired or been there for as long as he remembered. He cleaned out the refrigerator, filling a grocery bag and carried the offending items to the alley garbage cans. He returned to the apartment, opening all the windows rather than spraying the air freshener. While he waited for the place to air out, he wet a rag and scrubbed the inside of the refrigerator, then got one of the disinfecting wipes that Eva said were better for cleaning than a rag and wiped the counter and anything else he could think of. He stepped outside for a few hours to take a walk, and sit in the park with the Daily News, but he soon grew bored of the news stories and decided to call Dimitri and tell him about the smell.

But Dimitri was more interested in knowing whether Eva said she missed him and Nez said no but that he wasn't expecting her to. He then asked if Nez missed her but Nez said it wasn't that type of marriage. He always allowed her to do what she wanted because he didn't want anyone telling him what to do. This seemed to annoy Dimitri because people were always telling him how much he changed since getting married. Nez suspected that Dimitri was waiting for Nez to say he had to check with Eva before accepting an invitation for a drink or to the game because that's what he had to do with his wife. One of

the advantages of marrying a European, he said to Dimitri, is they have no desire to act like American women. Dimitri asked if he knew what Eva was up to when he was out and Nez said he guessed she was out, too.

Dimitri finally told Nez that something probably died in the apartment. He said that these things don't matter much to men but women make a big fuss about it. He said it had happened to him and that his wife gave him no peace until he got rid of the source of the offending odor. Nez thanked him and hung up but not without the sense that Dimitri hadn't been talking about the smell in the apartment. Dimitri wasn't a good conversationalist but he listened well and when he did have something to say, it was usually funny.

When Nez returned to the apartment, the smell was stronger and he was sure Dimitri was right. This was not the smell that came from sour milk or green and orange speckled cheese or vegetables covered in a thin film of slime. Something had died there. Nez went downstairs to the superintendent's apartment. The large man opened the door and squinted at him. Curly chest hairs, flecked with gray, stuck out from the opening of his low undershirt. Nez explained the situation and the super seemed to think it was possible since they had the exterminator in the basement just the other day to spray and put down poison. He surmised that one of the mice made it up to Nez's apartment and died. Without being asked, the man closed the door behind him and headed upstairs. Stepping inside, he stopped short and Nez had to balance himself on his toes so as not to walk into the man. For a moment, he worried that the super, never having smelled anything so bad, would ask him to leave, believing it was more than just a decomposing mouse. But the man turned and stared angrily at Nez. Is this some kind of joke? Nez stood there, not fully comprehending what was going on. There's no odor, the super said. Nez's eyes opened wide. How could he not smell that, he asked. The super grunted and went through the motions of

checking under the sink in the kitchen and bathroom and into corners in the rooms. He opened closets and peered under furniture before declaring that there was no mouse.

The super huffed and puffed his way from the apartment, leaving Nez standing in the middle of the stink, wondering if this was some elaborate plan of getting out of working. Now that Nez thought about it, the man didn't seem very interested in taking care of the vestibule, either. Flyers littered the floor and he couldn't remember ever seeing the super with a mop cleaning the stairs. But Eva said that he cleaned in the afternoon when people were normally at work and that she had never so much as seen a roach although she knew every building had them.

Nez decided that he would find the dead mouse and take it down to the super, throwing it inside his apartment as soon as the man opened the door. Before getting started, though, he hunted around for rubber gloves and fashioned a mask from a handkerchief that he found in his drawer one day. He remembered asking Eva where it was from, seeing as how he never owned a handkerchief but she said it must have been left in the dryer at the Laundromat and mixed in with their stuff. Seeing a use for it now, he folded it into a triangle, sprinkled some aftershave onto the cloth and tied the ends around the back of his head, the cloth covering his face. For the next two hours, he hunted every place he could think of where a mouse could go to die. He took out everything from under the kitchen sink and shone a flashlight into the corners looking for openings where a mouse would hope to die. He did the same in the bathroom and then moved the living room furniture to the center of the room to check places that he had not seen since moving in.

When his search came up fruitless, he began to think of what Eva would say when she got home and took one whiff. The few squabbles they had were always over household chores and he thought that she would see this as proof that if it weren't for her, the apartment would never be cleaned. He said he didn't mind an apartment that was a little dirty, that it was, in fact, a sign they had their priorities in the

right order. He said he couldn't understand her fascination with washing the sheets, why she insisted on spending her Wednesday evenings at the Laundromat when she had washed them on Sunday.

It was late afternoon when he got to looking in the bedroom. He took a moment to wipe the sweat from his forehead with a clean washcloth and stand by the window that looked out on the apartment building across the way. There wasn't much of a breeze but he found just taking a moment to collect his thoughts was soothing. He hated to think the super was right only because he didn't know what else to do about the offending odor. He took a large breath to clear his head, forgetting to breathe through his mouth and felt his stomach churn and nearly empty itself. The smell was stronger here than it had been elsewhere and in some strange way, Nez was comforted knowing that he was getting close to the source of the problem. Trouble was he and the super had been looking in all the usual places, the kitchen, bathroom. But it was possible that the mouse had chosen to die in a nicely decorated place.

Nez opened the closet and dropped to his knees, pulling out boxes and bags that had accumulated over the years. He shone the flashlight into the dusty corners, lying on his stomach to get a better view of any gaps between the baseboard and the floor. Finding nothing, he raised himself onto his knees and began replacing the bags, peeking inside, surprised to see they were mainly empty. He remembered them being full of Eva's things just a few months ago, when he was in here looking for a pair of boots. He told her she should either find a place for them in the apartment or get rid of them. Since he didn't come across any of the knick knacks or her books in his search for the mouse, he assumed she finally got around to throwing them out. He pushed himself onto his feet and waited for the lightness in his head to pass. When his sight focused, he felt there was something strange about the closet, an airiness about it that he hadn't seen in quite some time but then he thought that was an odd way to describe a closet and that the foul smell was starting to get to him.

He turned and walked around to the side of the bureau, wedging himself between the wall and wood. Wrapping his arms around it, he took a deep breath and pushed it away from the wall, noting that it moved easily. Then he remembered that wasn't unusual seeing as how Eva kept her things in there and that she had filled two suitcases with clothes. He wondered why she saw the need to take practically her entire wardrobe with her for a two week trip to Denmark.

Nez searched the room for another hour, disappointed when he came up with nothing. Still, he didn't believe the super. There certainly was a smell in here. Finding no other solution, he got the can of air freshener and walked through the rooms with his finger pressed to the nozzle, aiming the wet spray toward the ceiling and watching the fine mist cascade down. He decided that it would be no good to have his dinner in the apartment and that if he was going to buy something out, he might as well eat it out, too.

He returned to the bar, happy to see Dimitri in the corner, nursing a beer. He recognized the frayed paperback that sat on the table next to the sweating glass. Nez walked over to his friend, who was busy texting, and slid into the booth, laughing when Dimitri jumped and dropped the phone. Nez told Dimitri about the afternoon and that the smell was still there even though the super insisted there was nothing. Dimitri didn't think that was odd at all. He said he didn't like the way the super looked at him when he came to visit, always hanging on the landings, mop in hand. But Nez reminded Dimitri that he only came to the apartment that one time, just after he and Eva had gotten married, and that he couldn't judge by that. Dimitri blushed and said that the first time a man looks at you is the same as every other time.

Nez agreed and ordered a martini, apologizing for not showering before coming to the bar. He asked Dimitri if he would like to come to the apartment to smell it for himself. Nez didn't tell his friend that he was beginning to doubt his own nose, that after spending an entire afternoon taking the place apart, looking for a dead mouse, that it was all in his head. But Dimitri said he couldn't come by, that his

wife was expecting him home and that he had told her he was working late so that he could have a beer in peace. He placed a box of breath mints on the table and said that he planned on masking the taste of beer before going home. Nez laughed at his friend and told Dimitri to grow some balls and tell his wife there was nothing wrong with having a drink after work.

They sat silently but it was a different kind of silence than Nez was accustomed to from his friend. There was a sadness about Dimitri and every now and then, his phone would buzz and he'd hold it under the table reading and texting back. Nez asked if there was something wrong but Dimitri shook his head, shut his phone and stuck it in his pocket. Nez suggested that Dimitri call his wife and tell her that he was eating out but Dimitri said that things at home were bad and he wasn't in the mood for a fight. He had pretty much given in by now and was only looking for a few minutes to himself.

Nez ordered a burger and fries and another round of drinks telling Dimitri that he was sorry things weren't working out. He knew Dimitri was more the romantic than he was. Dimitri asked how Eva was, had she called him to tell him anything new. Nez said he hadn't heard from her since the text message but that he wasn't worried. Dimitri asked Nez if he knew when she said she'll be back and Nez said of course even though that wasn't true. He hoped that Dimitri wouldn't press him for details. He knew Eva was due to come home in another week but he forgot to ask just what day and time that would be. He prided himself on not being one of those husbands who need to know where his wife is every minute of the day.

Dimitri drank his beer and stared at the door, checking his watch at regular intervals. When Nez's dinner arrived, Dimitri popped two mints in his mouth and slid from the booth. He said to Nez he was sure the smell was from something dying in the apartment and that he wasn't surprised it seemed to be coming from the bedroom. It's not as unusual for married couples as some people think. If something

is to die, it starts there. Nez laughed so unexpectedly that his drink spilled from his nose. You mean to say if something is to die, it ends there, he told Dimitri.

Dimitri pulled a handkerchief similar to the one Eva brought home from the laudromat from his back pocket and wiped his face and neck. He grabbed the box of mints and the book that Eva was so fond of reading and headed for the door. It was another minute before Nez was able to eat.