

The Granny Panties

While folding laundry, Doreen discovers a pair of unfamiliar underwear. She stares at them, trying to place them. All of her underwear is pastel, and this is a billowy, white pair. It is as if she walked into her kitchen to find a stranger cooking dinner.

Then she has a quicksand moment of recognition.

Everyone knows what it means to find underwear that doesn't belong in the house. Whether the underwear is mixed into the laundry or lying under the bed or forgotten under a sofa cushion, it's unmistakable. Underwear never travel on its own. Someone has to bring a pair into your house, take it off, and forget it, or perhaps—more maliciously—choose to leave it behind: a soft explosive device.

Doreen spends a minute or two thinking about whether there's any other way this pair could have gotten into her house, but they haven't had overnight visitors in years and even dinner guests have become rare now that their friends have started dying.

Another woman has been in her house without Doreen knowing. She undressed here. She

fooled around with Doreen's husband here. Doreen looks around and imagines a naked woman in her living room, in her bedroom, in her kitchen.

The real shock of it is that it's happening now. Doreen and Harry have been married for 51 years. He is 73 and she is 71. It's not impossible to her that he might have an affair. Harry was charming enough in his time and just confident enough to attract a couple women. He had reasonably good looks: never a gut and always a manly mustache. There have been points in their marriage where Doreen wondered if he was cheating on her; years when he traveled more than necessary, weeks when he stayed at the office later than usual. Doreen had even snuck around a little to explore the edges of her distrust. More than once she had called her sister over to watch her children while she went to Harry's office to see if he was *really* working late. And he was. *Every* single time. Finally she had come to terms with the fact that he was both faithful and distant. She realized that every marriage had ebbs and flows, times of vitality and times of stagnation. This wasn't a sign of a *bad* marriage; it was the sign of marriage. So what if there were some times when he barely spoke ten sentences in a day? There were also times when he talked and shared and asked her about her days and her dreams. He wasn't a perfect man, but he wasn't a cheating man.

So, to find this pair of underwear now, at the end of their lives? What is he doing? Who is this old hussy? She knows from the big, silky, white briefs that she isn't young. When is he fucking her? While Doreen is off volunteering with her ladies' club at the food pantry? While she is doing the weekly grocery shopping? While she attends her book club? All of the above?

More importantly, what should Doreen do? Should she ignore it? Should she go sailing through life, secretly burning with this knowledge? Does it make it any better that they are now old, that he has been faithful for fifty years? One or two out of fifty, what does that low fraction earn him? A fucking medal? No. It earns him nothing.

Doreen looks at her watch. Ten to noon. Harry will still be out with his birding club for the next couple hours. Is that where he met this woman?

She pulls out the phone book—she still prefers the real yellow pages to the computer—and flips to locksmiths. Fuck Harry. She starts at the first one and calls numbers until she can find one who can come immediately.

He shows up in ten minutes. She'll tip him well.

"I just need all the locks changed."

Dan, middle-aged with a slight beer belly, says "Did you lose your keys?"

"No," Doreen says. "I lost my husband to a hussy."

He nods and looks at her sympathetically. He's heard it before. A lot. Infidelity is his bread and butter. He has kind eyes and, for a second, Doreen wonders whether she could seduce him and use him to get back at Harry. But she wouldn't know where to start seducing a 40-year-old man, so instead she gets out of his way and pours herself a cup of coffee in the kitchen.

Dan finishes quickly and meets her in her kitchen. .

"Coffee?"

"Sure," he says.

She sets a cup in front of him. He adds cream and sugar and sits on a stool. She opens her checkbook and writes him a check.

"What are you going to do?" he asks.

She shrugs. "Any interest in having a revenge affair?"

He laughs kindly. He holds up his left hand with its wedding band.

She laughs too and asks if he has kids. He does. They're teenagers. They drive him crazy.

It's two hours later when Harry finally comes home from birding. Doreen has been looking out the upstairs window. Normally he would come in and spend half an hour telling her about the birds he saw, and she would enjoy hearing it, not because she loved birds like he did, but because she enjoyed his enthusiasm. But today, he jiggles his key, rattles the keychain when he makes sure that he's using the right one, tries again, steps back confused. He doesn't know she is perched right above him, watching the whole time.

She opens the window.

"Hey! You!"

She holds the granny panties out the window and waves them to get his attention.

For years they had been saying they should sell this old house and move to a practical one-story ranch, for when they can't navigate stairs well, but right now she is happy to have a high window to yell from.

"Recognize these?"

For a second he looks like he has been caught eating fried chicken, which he loves even though it's bad for his arteries. He recognizes them. He is searching his mind for an excuse he didn't know he needed ten seconds earlier. Then he sets his face in a mask of exaggerated lack of recognition.

“No,” he says.

“Bullshit,” she yells. “You know these belong to your hussy. Now? Does she walk over here with her walker? Now? When you’re 73? Now?”

He says nothing. He seems to be rolling words around in his mouth, weighing them on his tongue.

Doreen stops him. “Here, take your granny panties back to your side-granny. Go live with her.”

She throws the panties at him in what she intends to be a violent act. Instead the silken material balloons out and they float down towards him, pushed slightly by the breeze. They aren’t sexy panties, but at that moment they seem startlingly beautiful. He doesn’t make any motion to catch them and they land at his feet. He looks up at Doreen. He looks down at the underwear. He shrugs.

“Okay,” he says. Okay. He turns around and walks down to the end of the yard, opens the gate, turns right, and without a look back, heads down the sidewalk.

Okay. Doreen stares. She did not expect that. Her act was anger. Her act was defiance. She wanted to make him feel bad, not leave. She wasn’t ready for that development.

She sits in that chair by the window for minutes and hours. The cicadas hum in the trees. A breeze comes in the open window, but it’s a warm summer breeze, offering no relief from the heat. The sun shimmers and traces closer to the horizon.

She makes dinner. She watches the nightly news. She goes to bed. She lies in bed, alone, sleepless. In the middle of the night she stares up into the blackness.

She gets out of bed and walks out the front door. She looks around as if she might have made a mistake, that Harry would still be loitering around outside, waiting for her to let him back

inside. The panties are still puddled down there, flaring up in the glow of the porch light. She scuttles out like a crab to retrieve them. She shakes them off, lays them flat on the dining room table, brushes out the wrinkles with her hand, folds them into neat thirds. She places them gingerly by the telephone, as if to remind him to give them back to the proper owner.

She sits around until the sun rises. She makes herself a small breakfast. She waits until midday and makes lunch. She waits until evening and makes dinner for two but only serves half of it. She goes to bed. She stares.

What have I done?, Doreen thinks. What have I done?