

Girl in the Tub

The roof started leaking again in the morning. Henry told himself he'd be upstairs complaining as soon as the drip filled the bucket to the brim. Usually, it never came to that, making the promise easy to keep. Two new leaks and a pair of pots from the kitchen later, the sun had traveled to the edge of the sky, so when Henry tossed the water down once more his patience went down the drain with it. He prepared his speech while pacing back and forth. A few times he stumbled over the pot standing in the middle of the living room and kicked up the innocent air around it. Never prior to this moment had Henry complained to someone about that same someone, but the fourth wet patch formed steadily above his head, and he'd exhausted his supply of buckets and pots.

He would knock on the door and introduce himself to 303 as Henry Reed, the neighbor down in 203. He'd ask about the leak with an indirect annoyance about its recurring nature. Just enough blame to induce shame but avoid a conflict. Maybe he'd jokingly ask for directions to

Noah's arc or feign concern for the mental health of the middle-aged gentleman, who he'd only met once in the elevator before. A five-minute ordeal, barely counting as an interaction between two people, after which Henry would be down in his apartment again, his damp, fall-hazard-ridden apartment. Henry and his rehearsed spiel made their way down the hallway and up the stairs, where the second door to the left, the one to Apartment 303, stood ajar.

Leaning by the entrance sat two bags of groceries. Henry failed to identify any group of the food pyramid inside them other than protein, which dominated the two bags in the form of raw meat. It wasn't a humanizing detail. Neither was the weird smell coming from inside the apartment. Henry couldn't quite put his finger on what type of awful the odor creeping up his nose was. Maybe he'd have stuck to the plan and knocked on the gaping door if it wasn't for the carpet of water seeping from the apartment out into the hallway.

There was no way 303 hadn't noticed the flooding unless he wasn't home. Judging by the waiting groceries, however, he most likely laid unconscious somewhere in the indoor pool his apartment had become. Heart failure from a protein-heavy diet sounded believable. On second thought, Henry once caught a fleeting glimpse of the guy in the stairway before, and although his pace won him no medals, 303 jingled the keys and slammed his door shut before Henry even arrived on his own floor below. It couldn't be a weak heart. There could've been an intruder, he thought. A certain emptiness tickled Henry's palms now as if a weapon of some kind should lie where only five vulnerable knuckles rested. He quickly shook his hands to rid himself of this paranoia. No need to make up grandiose stories where early-onset senility sufficed as an explanation. The man probably fell asleep while running a bath. As far as their short elevator chat had revealed, 303 worked night shifts, so it appeared plausible he'd slept the day through. Henry decided he was the only intruder here.

Despite entering the apartment as noisily as possible, no steps answered his own. Instead, the running tap in the bathroom came to an abrupt burbling stop. The pipes took some time to catch up, but eventually even the gushing in the walls ceased. With his slippers soaking in the cold wet, Henry tried to remember 303's actual name and drew a blank. What did it matter? The goal seemed accomplished without having to look anyone in the eye, as whoever waited behind the bathroom door clearly understood the meaning of Henry's visit. With a murmured thanks, Henry took a step back. Immediately, the water started rushing even faster than before. Curiosity gripped Henry almost as tightly as frustration. The speech he'd come to deliver kept hitching up his throat while the odd stench in the apartment burnt his nostrils, and before he knew it, Henry waded to the other side of the living room to the entrance of the dark bathroom. He swung the door open and reached for the light switch.

Once the light turned on, Henry heard hissing, the sound of an animal shying away from the brightness. Then he saw it. He wanted to look away or apologize as soon as their eyes met. Not just because it wasn't human and he felt rude to notice this simple fact, but also because it seemed to be naked and taking a bath. The thing looking up at him from inside the overflowing bathtub had features passing as nearly human, as well as fins and webbed fingers that now stopped playing with the faucet. It shrank back into the water as far as its form allowed it to. Its face, or what he saw of it, resembled a negative color image. The irises and pupils dripped milky hues, the white of its eyes appeared anything but white, and its eyelashes poked into the brow bone like icicles. Dark like the ocean at night, the lacquer skin's surface caught the glow of the lightbulb wherever its body curved and twisted, disappearing under the water's surface and reappearing as a tail. At least now he knew what the stench hitting him resembled. It must've been freshwater fish.

The impact of the situation nailed Henry's back to the wall. He slid down to the endless puddle on the ground, wetting his pants in the least embarrassing way that offered itself up at that moment. There, he simply sat and stared at what couldn't be anything other than a mermaid. No, it couldn't be. Calling that a mermaid, it was likening bats to fairies. Describing it as a creature seemed fair enough but most definitely not the magical kind. And even if she was, what did it have to do with him? Her watchful eyes slowly lost interest in him and returned to the flow of water, and he followed her example, remembering that he was only here to stop this problem from trickling down into his apartment. After he repeated that to himself for the tenth time, Henry finally mustered up the courage to look at the thing as nothing more than an obstacle on his way to the running tap. Despite stomach acid lining his gums for a moment there, he successfully swallowed that pill. It was just a fish.

Just a fish, he reminded himself as he edged closer to the bathtub along the wall. The cold water splattered all around his wet limbs, but it was the return of her stare that shook him down to the bone. A fish from the uncanny valley, he thought, that's all. Still pressed against the tiles, Reed's sweaty fingers finally found the valve. Unlike the creature, he lacked the strength, grip, and concentration to move the handle down a single inch. He cursed, and the thing curled its lips upwards into a smile. Not just that, it scoffed.

Henry paused. For a moment he suspected his words were not just lip-smacking and tongue-twisting to her. It was a she, right? He gave the pair of eyes another chance, and although they still registered as inhuman, he now discovered intelligence behind her look. Whether she understood him or not, she clearly understood a fair share. The tub she'd looked too big for before now seemed too small for her. How long had she been held here? This couldn't possibly be where she belonged. Suddenly, the endless strings of chewed-up gum framing her face asked

him to wrap one of her wet white strands of hair around his finger and get to know its texture, her texture. He propped up his arm on the bathtub to get a closer look. He expected scales on her, but there was nothing but smooth opaque. She stared. He remembered her reaction to the light, the way she had hissed and shrunk away. She was scared too. Perhaps even more scared than he.

“Hello. I’m Henry Reed,” he tried. Still in a squat, he waddled forward slowly, stretching out a careful hand. He hoped his reflexes would match hers enough for him to keep his five fingers.

“I’m the, uh, downstairs neighbor from 203,” he said.

She stared on, pulled her face into an expression he couldn’t make out. Maybe she wondered why she should shake a hand that already shook very well by itself. Maybe that confusion motivated her to brush along his knuckles, where her stillness rubbed off on him instantly. She raised that same finger and harmlessly poked the air as if asking for permission to trace his jaw with her long nails. Henry hesitated and leaned in.

He’d been wrong to be afraid. She was different, yes, but wasn’t he also different to her? Her purple smile kept curling, as if she not only followed his train of thought but had waited all along at the final station for him to leave his prejudice behind. He smiled back at her.

Scooting too close too hastily, his palm slipped from the ledge into the water, where it touched down onto something else, something not her. Now he saw them in the murky water. Bones and flesh and insides were distributed all around her, their color flushed out by the constant stream of water. Quickly, he pulled his hand away from what he recognized as his upstairs neighbor’s remains but failed to back away in time.

Her claw had dug into the soft skin between his ribs and hooked into them. Even above the fabric, she’d easily pierced through his flesh. It was too late to back away and too late to gasp

even. The moment he mistook her as human, it had been fleeting, fleeting just as this one. She wasn't human, he knew for sure now. Still, he could've sworn he saw pity in those milky pupils of hers, as she tore his heart from his chest.