

You Leave First

A Short Story

Jake could smell a dyke coming from a mile away. He had extrasensory perception after all, but he was also seeing more of them crowding the credit union where he worked at and cruising through the park down by the river where he went to sit and smoke. (This waterfront property was dedicated to some long-forgotten general who massacred Native Americans somewhere out West.)

There was also a pair of lesbians who lived in the downstairs apartment. One of them had even stomped up the stairs the morning of their move-in, knocked on his door, and asked if he could help them with their garbage disposal. Jake hadn't made a sound as he sat by the window and peered through the curtains at them carrying in boxes. The landlord must have told them he was the only tenant left in the building: nobody lived in the other apartment downstairs, and Mrs. Greisch across the landing from him had died two months ago.

Asking the man upstairs for help with the housework? They had probably wanted to pass and not raise any suspicions. Two women living together was already suspect enough, and even though they were multiplying at an alarming rate and flaunting themselves in public wherever they could find the space, they still needed to look good and civil in front of their neighbors, in order to avoid any complaints. But, as stated before, Jake had that sixth sense: he caught both of them leaning against the moving truck with a bone-sore, rough-rider nonchalance that would have impressed even John Wayne.

One must have been the long-haired femme to the other's short-haired butch. (Jake knew that much terminology when it came to lesbians.) And other warning signs filed in one after the other. They had too many plants, and all of them were overgrown and trailed onto the ground in stiff coils like snakes pulled from their winter burrows. Then there were dozens of crystals glittering in the sunlight and a Japanese woodblock print of a skeleton. Both lesbians were dark-

skinned with kinky hair, and Jake could already smell something hot circling in the atrium downstairs. He didn't mind spicy things, but preferred those that came in small glass bottles with red caps (or with cowboys on their labels).

And nobody even came to help them move in: they were all alone as Jake watched and looked forward to the inevitable day when he would hear paramedics' boots echoing throughout the building. He pictured a murder-suicide: that's how queer stuff usually ended. Either rat poison in the reeking stir-fry for them both, or a shiny ax while one of them laid in bed wearing some soft silky thing, followed by a bottle of pills. And if they were quiet about it, they wouldn't be discovered for at least a couple weeks, or until the smell grew unbearable and Jake would have to be the good Samaritan and phone in a wellness check. Or complain to the landlord and let them take care of it. (It had worked for Mrs. Greisch across the landing.) Meanwhile, Jake knew with *certainty*, in this grand hypothetical he had just conjured up, that they'd find his body sooner than the remains of those two random lesbians, or Mrs. Greisch's withered corpse with scowling eyes the color of fool's gold.

He watched the new tenants move in for the rest of the afternoon; the cries of furniture being dragged across hardwood floors didn't stop until just before midnight. And even when this cacophony ceased, Jake stayed up and listened for the creaking of bedsprings or the soft humming of a vibrator; they had to christen their new nest (of course), but they must have been especially circumspect because he couldn't hear anything, even with his cheek pressed against the floor of his bedroom directly above theirs. They must have been extra crafty, he thought. Or maybe they had chosen the other room for their bedroom.

And just as he predicted, the lesbians started cooking the following night, and something musty crawled up the staircase and slipped under his door. Yellowish smoke arose from in between the floorboards too and quickly seeped into Jake's drywall in tea-stained waves.

He soon learned the short-haired butch lesbian was a nurse and worked nights. The long-haired femme was a teacher or still in school: she was the first to leave in the morning and often came home after Jake did, stumbling inside with a huge bookbag and several reams of paper cradled in her arms. One time, she spotted Jake standing on the stairs, and he could see her pupils dilate ever so slightly. She didn't even nod at him; she slipped inside, and he heard the lock turn between them. (And even the rasp of the chain being fed into its track ever so carefully.)

Afterward, those odors from downstairs worsened in both frequency and intensity. And soon enough, they were accompanied by clouds of cat hair and Chinese food that didn't smell like proper Chinese food to Jake. Cats weren't allowed in the building, but he knew there was *something* lurking in the downstairs apartment. Several times, watching television late at night, he glanced out the window and saw a pair of tawny eyes flash back at him through the warped glass. They were encased in a huge hairball the color of burnt cinnamon that didn't even move in the wind.

Jake abhorred cats: he was mildly allergic to them and didn't trust things that moved so stealthily. The only thing they were good for was keeping mice off the farm. (But in apartments? That's what mousetraps were for.)

Meanwhile, those piss stains from all that curry and chutney and five-spice (or *whatever* it was, since Jake's spice lexicon only covered salt, pepper, and cinnamon) continued ascending his apartment walls. Jake regretted not having more things to hang up to cover them, but there was no way he was going to relent and go shopping, nor let a pair of dykes smoke him out like

that. But rather than descend and complain about the damages, he kept his ear pressed to the floor of his bedroom each night before going to bed, hoping to catch them doing something extra perverted.

In fact, he had been keeping a switchblade in his jacket pocket for a couple months now, for protection. And now, after especially hard shifts at work, he walked home with one hand tucked away, clutching his weapon even tighter whenever he saw a cat. He sometimes wondered what would happen if he grabbed one of those strays lurking around the park named after that long-forgotten general, punched it full of holes, and left it on that bench where he kept seeing those gay couples sitting and showing off like peacocks. Or if he left the corpse sluggishly bleeding on the hood of the lezzies' car outside.

Soon after, the short-haired butch lesbian left for work at ten one night, and when she turned from locking her door, she looked up and saw Jake standing at the top of the stairs. Jake wasn't sure if she could see the knife in his pocket (the hamper of laundry resting on his hip might have distracted her), but he tried to make his eyes burn especially bright this time.

And when Jake died two months later (having stayed home from work on Monday because of a stomachache, which turned out to be an appendix that ruptured and engulfed his heart on Friday), he was found the *very* next day when his manager phoned in a wellness check.

And that night, the lesbians came back with take-out, neither one hungry or up for cooking after seeing Jake get carried away, and they both saw him standing on the stairs, in the shadows. His eyes were like jaundiced spotlights bearing down on them. He didn't have his knife on him, but he was happy to see terror carved into both of their faces.

And when they moved out six months later, Jake wished the splotches on his walls had packed up and left with them. He could still see their peaks and valleys, even after the new

tenants arrived with a fresh coat of paint. Nobody in the building cooked curry anymore, but everybody owned at least one cat. The straight couple in his (former) apartment had a little boy too, and Jake thoroughly disliked him. He wanted to give the little shit nightmares, but it was ultimately pointless. He was six. Where would he run away to?

So Jake stuck to leaving mysterious stains on the stairs and haunting the dimly-lit basement. People who loitered there for too long had the honor of seeing him as a dark shape and a pair of yellow glinting eyes (all too big to be a cat's) peeking around the banister or squatting in the corner opposite the washing machines.