

The Man Who Lives In My Shower

by Dallas Woodburn

There is a man who lives in my shower. He was here when I moved into my apartment three months ago, so I didn't have much choice in the matter. When I asked what he was doing lounging in the tub, he said, "First come, first serve." Which didn't really answer my question, but the man who lives in my shower is an enigmatic sort of fellow.

He leaves when I need to take a shower. (He's not that kind of man.) I don't know where he goes — the living room, I suppose, or the kitchen. Perhaps he simply sits on the counter beside the bathroom sink, waiting for me to be done. But he hides from me outside the bathroom. I only see him when he's in my shower.

* * *

The Realtor Woman — "Call me Kym" — who sold me the apartment wore maroon lipstick, smudged slightly on her top lip, and electric-yellow high heels that emphasized the drab paleness of her skin. As she led me from entryway to dining alcove to bedroom she seemed to stomp down each foot with angry emphasis, but when she turned to relate some crucial point about window lighting or square footage her smile flared at me like the flashbulb of a camera. We both knew she was asking too much for the apartment. She spoke to me in the tone of the celebrity chef assuring the audience how simple it is to make triple-layer cheesecake with seedless raspberry sauce — trying to convince the audience that they, too, can add meaning to the chaos of their lives by baking a perfectly textured dessert. In this case, my dessert was the liberated possibility of my life if I chose to live in apartment 3B at 2697 Twenty-Ninth Street.

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The apartment was above a Mexican/Greek/Ethnic restaurant, where I imagined myself trying exciting new foods and becoming friends with the owners (undoubtedly a friendly old immigrant couple who would throw in free sides of baklava or bean salad and call me “mija”); the kitchen window looked out onto a quiet street, just a block or two away from a tree-shaded park, where I could take walks in the evenings or mornings or afternoons, if I became the type of person who takes walks. Maybe I would get a dog, and then I would have a reason to go on walks. A dog would probably do me good. Some company.

“I’ll take it,” I told the Realtor Woman. Her smile slipped for a moment into a round “o” of surprise at my abruptness. After all, we hadn’t even reached the bathroom yet (“Just wait till you see the *gor-ge-ous* tile work the previous owners put in around the tub!”). But, like the celebrity chef turning back to the cameras after a commercial break, she quickly regained her composure and rebooted her smile. *Say cheese!* I was momentarily blinded by the flash, and stars still twinkled in my vision as I signed the lease agreement.

* * *

It’s been two months, and I think the man who lives in my shower is becoming more comfortable with my presence — my slippers in the doorway, my bathrobe on the hook behind the door, my face lotion and toothpaste on the bathroom counter — because lately he’s started talking to me. Actually, he remarks on nearly everything I do. All from the bathroom, of course. He stays in the shower and shouts out commentary. Like this morning, as I walked past the bathroom — *My bedroom, he reminds me, please show some respect and knock first* — on my way down the hall to the kitchen, he yelled something I couldn’t hear.

I paused, turned. "What?"

"Where are you going?" he asked, peeking out from behind the plastic shower curtain. (He thinks the plastic curtain is tacky. "A floral-print cliché" he calls it. I told him I happen to like clichés. He responded by turning on the tap, soaking his head, and shaking water all over me, which I found very childish. When I told him this, he said, "I happen to like children.")

"I'm going to make breakfast," I said.

"What are you making?" he asked.

"Toast."

"What kind?"

"Peanut butter. You want some?"

"No, thank you. I'm not very hungry." (He's never hungry. That's another good thing about the man who lives in my shower. He's not like my freshman college roommate, who ate my food but then pretended not to know what I was talking about when I called her on it. There are few things worse than going to the fridge expecting to see the leftover chicken curry you'd carefully boxed up and carried home the night before, only to find the second shelf has an empty place between the milk and the mushrooms and your white take-out container is in the trash.)

"To be honest," the man who lives in my shower continued, "I don't like the way you make toast."

"What? I make toast fine. How can you ruin toast?" I slipped a slice into the toaster and retraced my steps to the bathroom, standing just outside the doorway so he couldn't see me in my faded flannel

pajamas.

"It's not your toast, exactly. It's your bread. Why do you freeze your bread?"

"How do you know I freeze my bread?"

"I just know," he said. "But I don't understand it. Nobody likes frozen bread."

"I freeze it so it doesn't get all moldy. I can never eat a whole loaf by myself without it growing moldy."

"Can't you just buy a smaller loaf? Or split a loaf with a friend?"

"That's ridiculous. Who would I split it with? And why do you even care that I freeze my bread? It works for me."

"I hate to think of you prying frozen bread slices apart with your fingers. And then sometimes the crust gets all under your fingernails. Nobody likes that."

DING! The toaster chimed. I padded back to the kitchen.

"And besides," he shouted after me, "toast doesn't taste as good when you make it with frozen bread."

"I can't even tell," I shouted back. "I think it tastes de-lish-ous."

"That's only because you've gotten used to frozen bread," he said. "You forget what real toast tastes like."

* * *

"Why do you freeze your bread?" Ryan asked me in the last

conversation we ever had. Actually, it wasn't the last conversation. We had one more conversation, later that night, but I don't like to think about that one.

I was making a sandwich for dinner, phone wedged between my chin and shoulder, and I complained about getting pieces of crust stuck underneath my fingernails when trying to pry two frozen slices apart.

"It gets all moldy if I don't freeze it," I explained. "I can't eat a whole loaf by myself without it getting moldy."

"That is the saddest thing I've ever heard," he said.

"Well, I'm pretty sad without you."

"I miss you too, babe," he said. "But someday we'll have a place of our own. And we won't have to freeze the bread. I'll make you fresh-bread sandwiches."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

The next day, he hung himself from his shower rod with his necktie.

* * *

It was the tie with the goldfish on it, the one I picked out for him right before he left for Detroit. I bought it because Ryan and I had a pet goldfish named Sparky. Most couples buy dogs, I know, but Ryan had horrible allergies. I didn't really mind. I liked watching little Sparky in his glass bowl beside our tiny kitchen sink. I liked the way the sunlight came in through the window and reflected off the water, and the way he swam to the surface and darted at the flakes of food

I carefully shook out for him each morning and night.

When I found out about Ryan's accident — that's the word my mind still clings to, accident — I thought, of course, that there must be some mistake. Ryan was happy. It was a farce, a fake, a framing.

Later, when the detail surfaced about the goldfish necktie, my stomach tightened and something inside me congealed into recognition. Ryan left no note. But I know the goldfish necktie was meant for me.

Exactly one week later, I woke up to Sparky floating belly-up in his little glass bowl, surrounded by uneaten food flakes. I couldn't bear to flush him down the toilet, so I buried him in the tiny backyard, underneath the hydrangea bushes. The hydrangeas, with their bunches of tiny white star flowers, were what you saw when you looked out the kitchen window. I liked to think Sparky had enjoyed his view of those bushes from inside his little glass bowl.

Before the hydrangeas had lost their blooms, my life was packed into boxes. I said goodbye to that tiny house on Hayward Avenue and moved into a tinier apartment on Figueroa and Twenty-Ninth. I came home from work one evening to the unmistakable sound of shower water running.

“Yoo hoo, is someone home? Excuse me? Do you have any shampoo?” a voice called from the bathroom. “I'm all out.”

And that is how I met the man who lives in my shower.

* * *

The man who lives in my shower is shaving his moustache. I'm glad; I'm not a fan of moustaches. It looked okay on him, because he always kept it neatly trimmed. But shaving is definitely an

improvement. I tell him so.

"Thanks," he says. "I think."

I watch the whiskers fall into the bathroom sink. Some drift sluggishly across the counter. "You're going to clean this up, right?" I ask.

"Of course. What kind of roommate do you think I am?" He turns to face me, half his moustache gone and the other half covered in white foam. I am about to laugh, but then I see it.

The goldfish necktie. He's wearing the goldfish necktie.

"Wait ... you're ... the necktie." I point.

He looks at it, holds it up between his thumb and index finger, lets it flap back down. He shrugs.

My tongue is itchy. "The necktie. Where'd you ... where'd you get that?"

He smiles. "You gave it to me."

"That's ridiculous!" I'm shrieking now. "I never gave that to you! Where'd you find it? Huh? Where?"

He shakes his head. "I won't be here much longer, Bee. Please, let's not waste time arguing." He turns back to his half-shaved moustache. His eyes, in the mirror, flit towards mine; he holds my gaze for a moment, as if to see whether I understand.

I don't.

He looks away.

I stumble to my room, shut the door, and crumple into a heap on the bed, thinking of the way he would lazily run his finger around the lip of Sparky's fish bowl when we were talking in the tiny kitchen after dinner. I'd be washing the dinner dishes and watching him out of the corner of my eye, his finger lightly making circles around and around and around that fishbowl, and it was all I could do to keep my knees from shaking. Usually I managed to set the last dish on the counter to dry, rinse the soapsuds off my hands, and smooth my hair flat before I calmly took his hand and led him to the bedroom. Once, though — the day he finally shaved his god-awful moustache — I hadn't washed but one wine glass and a frying pan before I couldn't take it any longer. I grabbed him in front of Sparky, right there in that tiny kitchen.

Tell me, isn't that what happiness is? A shiny goldfish in its bowl, hydrangea bushes in bloom, someone to love who can't even wait to finish washing the dinner dishes to love you right back?

* * *

When people used to ask about my engagement, I liked to tell them that it was both the happiest and saddest day of my life. Happiest because it was the day Ryan asked me to be his wife. Saddest because in the next breath he told me he was leaving.

"Jerry chose me to go to Detroit, Bee," he said.

I blinked. "What?"

"He needs to send someone, and he thinks I'm the best candidate. He told me after work today." Ryan looked up at me, still awkwardly perched on one knee beside the bed. His hands, lying palm-up on the bedspread, seemed lonely without the satin ring box cradled in them.

“When?” I asked.

“Three weeks.”

“Wow. That's soon.”

“I know — I know it is. But listen, Bee — it's only for a year. Just until you finish school. Then you can come out and join me.”

“In Detroit?”

“Yeah — or, you know, wherever they transfer me after that. You know how versatile sales is. Branches close and other branches open. They send you somewhere new. But that doesn't matter. Really, Bee. Because we'll be together. Right? Look at me.”

I looked down into Ryan's earnest hazel eyes, at the tiny mole above his left eyebrow and the crooked part in his floppy dark hair, and the tears that had been welling up in my eyes leaked free, blurring my contact lenses. Happy tears and sad tears all muddled together. He reached up and brushed my cheek with his thumb. Cupped my chin in his palm.

“You and me, Bee. That's all that matters. Right?”

I twisted the ring around so I couldn't see the diamond; made a fist so it dug into the tip of my finger. Pain. It still looked pretty, though, even without the diamond winking up at me.

“A year's not so long,” I said. “I guess a year isn't so long.”

He hugged me then, and kissed me, and it wasn't until he died that I realized I'd never actually said yes.

* * *

I have a new saddest day now. And though the ring still clings to my finger, I don't think of it as my engagement ring anymore. *Till death do us part*. What a silly promise, that death could part two people. Death means love grips tighter, suffocates, becomes laced with regret. And regret is messy. It clings to you.

Till death do us part. What a morbid, terrifying thing to say at a wedding. Of course, we didn't make it to our wedding, so Ryan and I never promised that death would part us. Maybe that's why it hasn't. Maybe that's why he refuses to leave.

Now, if ever anyone asks about my engagement ring, I pretend not to hear. Nobody likes a suicide, especially when they're expecting a wedding.

* * *

A golden strip of light shines beneath the bathroom door. I knock softly, twice, then step inside. The man who lives in my shower is perched on the side of the tub, a stack of crumpled white pages in his lap. He looks up and nods hello.

"I didn't know you could read," I say.

"What made you think I couldn't?"

"Nothing. I don't know."

"You didn't think ghosts could read?" he asks. "Is that it?"

"Are you a ghost?"

The man in my shower gives me a half-smile, but doesn't say

anything. He simply shuffles the papers and continues to read.

I watch him for a moment — did his hair always flop over his eyes like that, the part slightly crooked? I search for the tiny mole, the one over his left eyebrow, but it's difficult to see in this light.

“What are you reading?”

He glances up. “Your short story.”

Blood throbs in my temples. “What story?”

He flips back to the first page. “It doesn't have a title.”

Not that one. I reach in and with one swift motion grab the papers from him. “How did you get this?”

He blinks up at me like a startled child. “You gave it to me. Remember?”

“I don't know what you're talking about. I never — ”

“Who's this guy, Bee?”

“What guy?”

“Who's this guy in your story?”

I stare at him for a moment. His eyes look more green than hazel, but maybe it's just the light. I shove the papers at him and slam the door behind me.

* * *

“Who's this guy, Bee?”

His voice on the other end of the line was small and tight. I pictured his words with little curlicues of anger, scribbling their way into my ears.

“What guy? What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I'm talking about. This guy. In your story.”

“My story — Ryan, that's fiction — ”

“Who is he? Don't lie to me. I've read your other stuff. You always base your stories in real life. You even told me that, remember? God!” I heard the muffled sound of something falling in the background. I pictured Ryan's angry clenched fist. I pictured his leg kicking a chair, knocking it over.

“Ryan. Listen to me. There is no one else.”

“Shut up, Bee. You could at least be honest with me.” He was breathing hard and his words were slurred.

“Have you been drinking? You're being ridiculous. I am being honest, Ry!”

“Then who is this guy?”

“I based him on you, okay? You.”

“Liar!” Another loud crash. I tried to imagine what it was. The first time I visited Ryan in Detroit, we went to Ikea and I helped him pick out furniture for his apartment. Metal stackable crates for his DVD and music collection. A long, narrow, glass-topped coffee table. I made him buy the tall painted vase; he kept it in the corner and filled it with sunflowers whenever I visited. Maybe that crash was

the vase falling over. I pictured crushed yellow petals, water oozing into the carpet.

“Ryan, calm down. I'm not lying to you.”

“I have hazel eyes.”

“I know you do.”

“I have hazel eyes and this guy in the story has blue eyes.”

“So? I just changed your eye color — ”

“Your eyes are so big, like the eyes of a little boy, blue as a perfect robin's egg — ”

“Ryan — ”

“Looking into your eyes, it's as if I can curl up and fall asleep inside them — ”

“Stop it — ”

“Safe, warm. Protected — ”

“Ryan, I sent you that story because I want you to be a part of my life out here. I want to share my work with you. I want your support. I'm having that story workshopped next Thursday and I was hoping you could give me suggestions — ”

“Here's a suggestion: why don't you go show it to your other boyfriend?”

“I'm not going to argue about this with you any more.”

“Just because I'm far away doesn't mean you can parade around like a fucking slut — ”

I hung up. I thought about calling him back right away, but decided instead to watch an episode of *Friends*. Give him a chance to calm down and sober up. Then I would call him back. It was the *Friends* episode with the fake Monica. One of my favorite episodes. After the ending theme music swelled, I dialed Ryan's home number, then his cell. But by then there was no answer.

Of all my regrets, that stupid episode of *Friends* is the hardest to keep buried.

The last two words he ever said to me were *fucking slut*. That is why I don't like to think about our final conversation. That is why I still eat frozen bread. And that is why I dropped out of my MFA program and stopped writing altogether.

* * *

I found out later that Ryan had gotten demoted at his job that day. His boss said he had been coming in late, leaving early, missing sales calls. A couple of his coworkers thought he was depressed and suggested he see a shrink, but Ryan never wanted help from anyone. Especially not from me. I tell myself that's why I had no idea, until that last conversation, that something was wrong. I tell myself that's why I didn't know how close to the edge Ryan was. He was 2,000 miles away. He was good at hiding. He gave a remarkable performance, at least until the very end. That was the only time I got a small peek behind the curtain.

And what did I do? I hung up the phone.

* * *

Midnight. I can't sleep. I slip into the kitchen, heave open the refrigerator door. Hummus, yogurt, ketchup, milk. Leftover chicken and rice in a plastic container, a condensation of water droplets on the inside of the lid. I close the refrigerator door.

Padding back to my empty room, I notice the golden strip of light still creeping out from beneath the bathroom door. I tip-toe up and press my ear against the thin wood door panel. Nothing. My heart seems to be beating very loudly. I hesitate, my fist inches from the wood, and then I knock softly, twice. Nothing. I slowly open the door and step inside. For a half-instant, I'm terrified that I'll see his body, hanging lifelessly from the shower rod.

But the man who lives in my shower is perched harmlessly on the side of the tub. Has he moved at all in the seven hours since I stormed out on him this evening? He is wearing the goldfish necktie, but it is unthreateningly loose around his neck. He is still holding the stack of crumpled white pages in his lap. He looks up at me.

"Hi," I say. My voice is dry and croaky.

"Hi, Bee," he says.

I look at my toes as I walk towards him. My nails are painted pink, the polish chipped around the edges. I don't even like the color pink. I sit beside him on the rim of the bathtub. It is filled with sudsy water, cold to the touch. Now my hand has soapsuds on it; I wipe it off on my striped pajama pants. I glance down at the page the man who lives in my shower is reading. It is the same page from earlier.

"I love you," you say. We're lying together on my bed and you turn on your side to look at me. Your eyes are so big, like the eyes of a little boy, blue as a perfect robin's egg. Looking into your eyes, it's as if I can curl up and fall asleep inside them. Safe, warm. Protected.

"I love you, too," I say. I've said it before, to other people, but nobody's eyes are as blue as yours, and I realize with a flood of piercing certainty that until this moment I've never really meant it.

I look at him, finally. His eyes are hazel. His part is crooked. He looks exactly the same as the last day I saw him, hugging goodbye at the airport. He held me so tightly, I remember thinking for a moment that I couldn't breathe. As if he was trying so desperately to hold onto something. I should have known, then. How could I not have known?

"How could I not have known?" I ask. Warm tears gather around my eyes.

"I didn't want you to know," he says.

"But why not? I could have helped. I could have ... Things could have been different."

He sighs. "I wanted to be perfect for you. I couldn't bear for you to see me in such a bad place."

He drops a page of my story into the bathtub. I watch the page fill up with water and sink. I watch the ink blur. He drops a second page, then a couple more.

"I was so mad at you," I say. "I was furious. How could you do that? How could you leave me like that?"

"It was a mistake." Another page drifts lazily down into the sudsy water. "You have to believe me. I didn't mean to leave you. I'm sorry, Bee. I'm so sorry."

My nose is running, my eyes burning with angry tears. I wipe them away with the back of my hand. "And that's supposed to make it all

okay?" My voice is louder than I intended.

"You can't go on living like this forever," he says.

I don't say anything. I hug my knees up to my chin so I am precariously balancing on the narrow edge of the tub. Slight pressure, and I'll fall in.

"Frozen bread and ghosts won't do."

His hazel eyes gleam the same way they did when he told me he was leaving for Detroit. I know his next words before he says them: "It's time for me to go." Only, I realize now, there was something else there before, a flicker of fear that I mistook for anxious exhilaration. That isn't there now. His face is calm. His eyes are unclouded.

"Goodbye." He leans down and kisses my forehead, softly. Just a slight pressure, like the gentle push of an index finger against the small of your back, but it's more than I can bear. I waver and tumble backwards into the bathtub, bumping my elbow against one of the faucet knobs and sitting down hard on my tailbone. The soggy pages of my short story, unfinished and untitled — the last words I wrote — drift around me. I shiver. I pry off my sopping shirt, strip away my pajama pants. I gather the pages of my short story into a comforting weight against my chest. Only then do I glance up at the man who used to live in my shower. He smiles at me from the bathroom doorway.

"Goodbye, Ryan," I say. "I'm sorry, too."

"You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I love you."

"I love you, Bee. I always will." And then he is gone.

* * *

I have a dog now. A golden retriever. I got him from the Humane Society. His name is Fitz, after F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* is my favorite book, though Ryan could never get through it. I think he would have liked my Fitzgerald, though. He would have liked to see me take Fitz on walks through the park. We stop at a bench overlooking the playground. Fitz curls up on the ground near my feet. He doesn't need a leash; he won't run away. I sit sideways, with my knees up on the seat, and tilt my face to the winter sunshine. I gently open the cover of my worn spiral notebook, smooth flat a fresh page, and place the tip of my pen against the emptiness. It will take a long time to fill it, I know. But I begin.

