

Maximus and Kimchi

by Emily Schultz

The dogs shit on the roof and then, every two weeks or so, the man in Apartment 311 climbs out the window with a plastic shovel and scoops the shit into a white plastic bag, which soon grows heavy with dung, dangling from his black-gloved wrist. He flips off the men below who work at the Honda dealership, which rightfully owns the roof his dogs shit upon. They've written letters to the landlord about these adjacent rooftops and whose property is whose, and the man and his dogs. Day and night, night and day, the dogs shit. He lets them out at midnight, 4 a.m., noon, and sunset again. They hunch—the small one making little runny shits and the big one massive hard turds, black as hockey pucks. Their messes dot the roof like constellations and the stink drifts down.

The bag drags like a pregnant cat belly and the man lugs the thin plastic skin—the shit inside showing through—across the roof, back in the window. Through his apartment then down the hall he carries it, far out in front of him. It threatens to break at the handles. It leaks yellow water from its corners onto the floors. It reeks like the ground in spring after the thaw—a muddy, layered smell that gets inside one's mouth. Face a-snarl, the man from 311 yanks open the door to the garbage chute. Down the shit goes. He pushes the bag in. It finds the hole and falls—three floors, he can't hear it land in the Dumpster downstairs—but there is shit on his hand now and on his boots, and he walks again through the shit water in the hallway and nearly slips.

When he is back inside his apartment the dogs jump up howling as if perturbed that it has been taken from them—what they worked so hard to output—or perhaps distressed that he has returned. The man yells at them and peels off his useless gloves, toes off boots, strips, and gets into the shower. He has a date. He pulls a white bar

of soap with two hairs wrapped around it from the splash pad, and rubs it over his hands and wrists before lathering every inch of his naked, whorled body. He sings.

The girl arrives in tight pants and stilettos. This bodes well for the man in 311, he thinks. She comes in from the front hall and won't see the back way where he left the shit water to stand in small puddles outside his neighbors' doors.

The first thing she does is kiss him on the cheek and accept his compliments; the second thing is pick up the Shih Tzu and tease its hair with her long pink fingernail, kissing its crown and muttering indistinguishable sweet talk in its perky ears. If the man in 311 were honest with himself, he would admit there is still the faint trace of shit on the air. But the man has splashed on aftershave and can't smell anything but the sex that awaits him. He is wearing his shirt collar open the way she likes it and he has kept her dog for her in spite of her moving out. He will get her back, he thinks, and he shrugs on his black leather jacket nonchalantly and says, "I made reservations."

She continues to coo at the sparkly-eyed little Gremlin, whose name is Kimchi, so he says, "Babe, let's go."

Reluctantly she sets the animal down. She looks around. "The place looks good."

As she surveys the handiwork and the furniture, which is new, the man adjusts his jacket and pats his chest pockets as if he is looking for something. He can picture her here, the way she would inhabit that corner wedge of couch late at night in her underwear and tankini.

"Yeah, doesn't it?" He gestures to the white leather lounger, "This shit is like butter. Check that stitching."

The woman inspects the set as if she doesn't believe him about the quality. "You're not going into debt again, are you?" she says finally.

The man laughs.

He took the place because of the dogs. Their old apartment, around the corner, had no roof access. Three flights down. Every day all day it seemed he was going down those stairs out into the alley and back up again. The woman liked how they had it. "So much work," she'd said when he'd suggested the move within the building. "You want to do all that work for the dogs?"

Now, they lock the dogs inside the apartment though the little one is scampering back and forth—clawing, paws scuttling on hardwood. Maximus, the boxer, barks twice as they leave: a backwards guard dog.

The man from Apartment 311 takes the woman's elbow. She teeters, leaning on him in such a manner that he forgets the shit in the hallway, and out they walk the back way. She doesn't look down at the puddles, but the man can smell them now and his face clouds. They pass one of the neighbors, the short one from 314, who looks the woman up and down skeptically. Shorty is friendly to everyone but later sticks signs and notes up everywhere about how the building is going to shit.

He holds his date's fingers as they descend the stairs. The girl has slept with him twice recently. He knows there was someone else she was seeing, but she's coming around. Tonight. She'll give into him; he'll possess her; she'll come back. They'll have to shut the dogs in the other room, because Kimchi will yap and Maximus isn't fixed and will try to get between them.

On the landing the smell hits. The recently dropped bag in the basement garbage room wafts its rich contents through the stairwell.

"Oh." The girl gags, and sways on her heels.

He takes her arm, guides her. "Come on," he says. The restaurant is expensive. He may be an idiot, but he's an idiot with money.

"It's like rotten banana and sulfur," she gasps as they stumble onto the sidewalk. The cold clean March air. Walking past the Honda dealership, she says, "You said you'd get it together. What was that?"

His lips press tight. He is caring for her dog alongside his own. Her dog, her shit. He could punt the puny thing off the roof any day. But what he says is: "Relax," and he takes her arm again. "Relax. The place looks good, you said so, and wait 'til you see where we're going."

The men from the Honda plant are just locking up the gates—all those rows of used cars gleaming, washed and waxed, ready for new owners. Zero down. Inside the dark interiors, prices hang from their rear-view mirrors—*Today's Special \$12,995*—as if they are grocery store produce.

The girl has relaxed, her shoulders letting down a little. Her heels pitter-patter an erratic rhythm over the concrete. She's laughing, telling him a story now. The man from 311 knows this but doesn't hear. His head is turned. He can feel the eyes of the Honda men, especially the one in the suit who is locking the gate, clicking the padlock closed. In front of the garage and the showroom, another employee backs up a car, reparking the last vehicles for the night. Suddenly, a red thing the size of a chocolate Smartie nearly backs up over the sidewalk and the man and the girl, who squeals. He jumps, bumping into her, and she nearly falls over but he catches her, braces her. She wobbles in her high-heeled boots, a manicured hand clutched to her tiny heaving chest.

The man from 311 slaps the new vehicle hard with the flat of his hand. "Hey, watch it!" Leather shoulders rippling, he goes to the driver's side. He leans down and peers in the window, which is tightly done up, a film between them. "You almost backed over us."

The driver doesn't speak, his eyes the color of cobwebs.

"I said you almost hit my girl!" The man from 311 raps a hand on the car roof. A spidering of pain has begun in the bone below his knee.

Still the driver says nothing.

“Don't you speak English? Fuck you!” The man from 311 shouts as loud as he can. “What's your name? I said, ‘What's your name?’ I'm gonna call your boss.”

He takes out his cell phone and begins punching in random buttons, looking at the side of the building as if there's a number there for a complaint hotline. He lifts the phone beside his ear. “Get out and apologize right now. You apologize to the lady!” He drops the phone alongside his hip, as if he's forgotten he dialed something into it.

The woman shivers, not as if she's afraid, but as if she's too cold in her thin clothing to stand there without him. He mistakes her stance, goes back to her, puts his arm around her shoulders. “You hurt? You okay?” he asks, and the driver sees his opportunity and pulls the candy-red car into the dealership fast.

The man from 311 curses loudly, but the woman has hooked an arm through his again. She pulls him down the sidewalk—the rat-a-tat-tat of her heels starting to give him a headache. “Please baby, let's go. Don't do this again,” she says. “Baby...” There's a plaintive tone in her voice.

He gives into her. “Baby” is a word she reserves for the Shih Tzu or for squeaking at the height of passion. The man hugs her close, her perfume in his nostrils, and they take a few more steps down the sidewalk.

The other man from the Honda dealership, the one who locked the gate still stands there, staring after them, one foot positioned up on a parking block. The keys in his hand bounce up and down, the metal teeth ticking around and around on the ring.

“You smell,” he says firmly to the couple's back. “You stink.”

The leather jacket ripples, and the man from 311 turns. Maybe he's heard the putdown, or maybe he's heard the keys jangling, or maybe he feels the stare the way a dog knows when there's a cat in the bushes or that a storm is coming a long ways off. The two men lock eyes, then the car dealer smiles, lips hitching up, bright molars under the lot lights.

Upstairs, in the adjacent building, in Apartment 311, the roof dogs howl at the glass.

The man from 311 returns home, without the girl, to another pasted-up sign from his neighbor, and the scent of Comet cloaking the stale air of the passageway.

Maximus and Kimchi look up when he enters. The boxer's eyelids hang red and sad as a cartoon drunk's. The Shih Tzu circles his feet frantically. The man sees the red leash on the hook by the door, but shrugs off his coat and drops it over the hook so it is hidden. He releases a stream of profanity into the empty apartment and the dogs look up expectantly, as though this is how he always greets them lately. He runs a broad hand across his face—his head thick and aching from the wine.

He opens his window and picks up the little dog, whose body seems to hang in his hand as if on the pendulum of a set of scales, before the man frees the furred object onto the flat, tarred roof. The boxer leaps through the hoisted window, runs almost to the edge and sniffs —turns in four circles, then squats, shits.

