

Incidentally

by Tara King

It started (or maybe ended) with the boot flying off the balcony and bouncing in the dead grass in front of our building. All afternoon a localized weather system of shouting through the ceiling, marbles pouring onto the linoleum, bowling balls crashing through vases and punching holes in the wall. It sounded like bodies hitting the floor, but that's probably just my imagination. I read too much as a kid about serial killers. I don't want to be the neighbor who didn't notice trouble until the building started to smell like dead, rotting girlfriend.

Luckily, I was proven *not* to be that neighbor. Ten minutes later, Dave's girlfriend, Kristin, retrieved her boot, still lying there like a dead, glossy animal. She was not upset. She was perfectly, convincingly nonchalant. Maybe they were playing some kinky game; he was taking her boot off with his teeth and accidentally threw it out the window. I don't know. I don't pry.

But, as Alan and I watched the game, Dave came downstairs with clear trash bags of clothing. They filled the trunk of the shiny black car that's always parked in front of our window. He caught us staring at least twice on his trips to and from the building. They were a timid couple. He signed for care packages from my mom.

After five bags of clothes, two sets of speakers and a microwave, two pillows appeared from over the balcony, one at a time. The first flew over the car into the street. The second landed on the curb next to the passenger door. They looked naked without cases and their tags fluttered in the breeze. Uncomfortable. The street was dry so I am sure they were fine, but they were sort of embarrassing. Nobody came for them. Alan closed the blinds and that was the end.

Later sirens cried outside and my mind again wondered (too much crime tv) if something dreadful had happened. I peeked out the blinds and discovered two facts:

1. There was a completely unrelated traffic stop across the street.
2. The car full of bags was gone.
3. (I guess there are three facts) The pillows were gone as well.

I wanted to invite Dave down for beers, to make up for being nosy. Or I wanted to give him a bag of candy and a thank you note because he signed for my Thanksgiving care package. I wanted to run into Kristin at the grocery store, which sometimes would happen, and she'd give me the details of what happened. I would be sympathetic and nice and I'd know if Dave was crying up there or living in filth or constantly watching porn or what. Or I'd just say hi and ask if he needed to talk, or ask him to watch our cats. I did nothing. I haven't seen him since.

I accidentally took a nap on our porch about a week after the incident with the lonely pillows. The wooden planks of Dave's balcony hung above our porch. The sun was shining gently like it does on warm days late in fall, when it's out there, leaving, heading farther and farther but the rays still land on my skin like someone calling from afar. From space. Warm and loving.

Her car had not reappeared. Their cars had matching obscure bumper stickers, and it seemed sad for the stickers to be separated, missing that companionship in a world of unintelligible and unfriendly bumper stickers. I was reading *The Lord of the Rings*, but the catalogue of the heirs of Numenor put me to sleep. I felt bad for getting sleepy, but I put the book down and dozed. I woke a bit when the main door of the building opened and swung closed, and that's when I realized my blanket was down around my feet, leaving me awkwardly exposed. Through my lashes I saw Dave. I faked sleep. His sneakers snuck on the dead grass. Not a twig snapped. I faked it the best I could, smoothing my eyelids and my forehead, and let him approach. I didn't know what else to do. All he did was pull the blanket up over me, softly like a gentleman in a movie. I breathed slowly, trying not to give myself away. He was

quiet, so much quieter than the rumble above our heads every night. Is he eating enough?

Every day I pull up to the building and wonder if he's up there. He's avoiding me. Or maybe I just haven't gotten over snooping on him as his relationship unravelled, one driving away in a shiny car and the other circling, vacuuming, stuck in that shitty second floor apartment. I assume they used their apartment the same way we use ours. In the bedroom they shared, the bed is in the same place. They have dark closet doors with the same fake swirls of oak or chestnut or whatever. The second bedroom is for guests. I don't know that they actually broke up. Both names are still on the mailbox. They lived together longer than we've been here and we're practically home owners as far as renters go. Five years is a long time in this neighborhood. I ask Alan not to throw my shit out the window if he decides to kick me out.

So I crashed my bike less than a block from home. I hobbled to the front door, holding the handlebars with my fingertips, because the rest of the skin was wrecked pretty bad. I locked my bike to a stop sign and walked up the steps to the apartment. It hurts less if you hobble and make a big show of it. I winced, then patted and prodded my pockets. No keys. No jangling lump in any pockets.

I rang the bell for my apartment. Alan was gone, but I rang anyway because I felt like I ought to make the attempt. He'd be home in two hours, which is a long time to sit on your steps in November with a skinned knee and bloody palms. I rang the bell of my apartment again. Then I called Alan, who said it would be close to an hour before he could get here.

I rang the upstairs number. Dave's static-blurred voice came over the speaker. The buzzer sounded, and he stuck his head out the door to wave hello. This was familiar.

"Do you actually mind if I come up and wash my hands?" I displayed them. His eyes got big and he waved me up.

I had never been in his place before. There was a beautiful man on the couch. He was not wearing a shirt and I realized Dave was also not wearing a shirt. There were two beers and a pipe sitting on the table, and the smell of marijuana. I realized I walked in on something, so I hurried to the bathroom. The shower curtain was green and magazines were stacked on the back of the toilet. There was not a jug of bleach under the sink or a water stain on the ceiling, like in ours. This was the bathtub that caused the water stain on our ceiling. I turned the sink faucet on and it squeals, which is the noise that wakes me up in the morning.

"What happened?"

"Fell off my bike."

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine, but Alan won't be home for a while and I didn't want it to fester. I'm sorry to interrupt, I'll be out of your hair in just a minute."

"Take your time, I don't mind. Can I get you anything?"

"A bandaid or two would be great."

The hot and cold water did not mix the way I expected it to. I got the temperature right, and plunged my hand in. It hurt like a motherfucker. I felt bad for children everywhere. Skinned knees and palms and elbows are no joke. Dave showed up with five bandaids as I was clenching my teeth, and deposited them on the back of the sink.

I rubbed the dirt out of the flapping flesh. This also hurt like a motherfucker. I patted my hands dry on toilet paper so I wouldn't get his towels bloody. I rubbed the edges of the band-aids to make them stick longer.

I peeked in each bedroom, and he called from the kitchen, "Do you want a beer?" but I was distracted by something I saw in the second bedroom. It was a stack of my clothing--the bulky green sweater my mother gave me for Christmas six years ago. There was the gold miniskirt I bought on clearance at Target. I swear to God. It was a *big* pile of clothes, too. I slowly replied, "I'm alright. Alan should be here soon."

"Are you sure?" He saw me looking in the bedroom and cleared his throat. I looked at him but I was distracted running through the last time I did laundry, looked in my closet, wore those clothes. I have not seen any of those clothes in a while. I had assumed that I had given them to Goodwill. I purge a lot. I looked again and opened my mouth. Dave was standing there and his guest was looking at me over the back of the couch.

He held out an open beer to me, "You should stay. What else are you going to do? Sit on the stairs?"

I nodded and tried not to look again.

"Adele, this is Myron. Myron, this is Adele."

"Nice to meet you, Adele."

I held my palms up. "I'd shake, but..."

He smiled. His teeth were incredible. "Have a seat."

So I did.

Eventually Alan arrived. I saw him out the window on the sidewalk. I finished the last sip of my beer. Myron looked relieved and Dave, well, Dave looked creepy. I had been mulling over it for the past forty minutes, thinking of the noises and wondering about how he must have taken them from the laundry. The only way to the laundry is right past my door.

I do not tell Alan about the clothes. At home I pretend to read but I actually just track his movements by the sounds I hear. I remember when he tucked me in on the porch, pulled that blanket so tenderly over me. The memory is now too weird to contemplate. Two sets of footsteps walk above us sometimes. Myron arrives and leaves in a silver four-door sedan. I say hi when our paths cross at the front door but he never replies. He never said anything the entire time we were having that beer, either, except, "Have a seat."

I write down what goes in the laundry in a tiny notebook. For all I know he is responsible for all the socks I've ever lost. For the first month nothing vanishes. I almost stop taking notes. I must have misunderstood. He didn't even seem ashamed when he saw me staring at the pile. He must know they are mine.

And then he starts again: An old t-shirt. What does Myron think of that lone stack of women's clothing? All the clothes he takes are too shitty to be sold. I lay on the carpet in our second bedroom, right beneath the place where my clothes are sitting and I stare at the ceiling. There are lumps in the plaster. I wonder how big the pile is. I wonder what he could possibly be doing with it. I start making predictions about what will go next. I am always wrong. I was convinced he had my pink long underwear, but they showed up again a week later. Maybe he put them back to throw me off.

Around Christmas time I arrange a dozen cookies on a paper plate. I do this out of a sense of neighborliness, and because I want to get into his apartment again. Actually, Alan baked the cookies and he would question this whole endeavor. Alan would not believe me at all; he never does. Thankfully, I am clever and waited for him to go out.

My face in the mirror looks totally fine. I do not look like I tried too hard or not enough. I look the same way I do every day. I head upstairs. The carpet is gritty from salt and sand. I knock. He looks surprised to see me, but maybe not as surprised as he should. I offer the cookies.

"Merry Christmas!" I feel like Clarice Starling going to Hannibal Lector's house. He looks blankly at the cookies, then takes them graciously and invites me in. The apartment is clean. He vacuums a lot. He also takes a lot of baths.

"No Myron tonight?"

"Nope, he's working."

"Ah." I survey the apartment. In the corner the latest theft sits on the edge of a bookshelf. It's practically daring me to grab it. Just casually reclining there. This may as well be a tv commercial for laundry detergent or something. It practically has eyeballs. It's staring at me, wagging its purple cotton eyebrows like Giancarlo Giannini. It is not a subtle challenge. I was not expecting this.

"You know, I really love this bookshelf. It divides up the room just right. Obviously, I know how hard it is to make this big space

really comfortable, you know, homey, and I love the way you've used this."

He doesn't reply except to offer a beer. I accept although I am certain he offered only out of politeness. I feel like a 1950s homemaker, the kind who who uses her social manipulation to get her way. Tonight I am digging. I want to know why the fuck this guy is stealing my clothes. The shirt wags its eyebrows at me and I move in for the kill.

"Oh, this is cute. You know, I used to have a shirt just like it." I finger the shirt. It is a cheap purple tank top, made of thin slouchy cotton, and long enough to wear as a dress if you're desperate. The shirt remains defiant.

He nods. "Kristin's. I'm hoping to return it to her soon." He swigs his beer and keeps looking at me.

"Haven't seen her around in a while."

"Yes, well." He watches me as I poke around.

"So how do you know Myron?"

"We went to school together."

"Oh, where?" He starts talking about some school I've never heard of. I interrupt. "I just love seeing what other people do with small apartments," I say, heading back towards the bedroom even as he weakly protests. I am vaguely aware that my behavior means I won't be invited back.

"This is your home office?" The stack is still there. It's mewing pathetically at me, so I pick it up.

"Look, Adele, I'm sorry but I think you should go home." He walks over to me and tries to take the clothes from me. I pull away and he drops his beer, the dark brown stout soaking the beige carpet. Just like ours. I wonder how much beer it would take to soak through to our ceiling. We both look up and lock eyes with each other. I stammer a bit and drop my beer, too, letting them commingle until they soak through the carpet and the floor into our ceiling.

I left the purple shirt on the bookshelf, which is unfortunately near the balcony door and not the front door. He'll

block my exit if I go over there, but that shirt still has its eyes on me. I duck past him into the living room and skitter over to the balcony door. I grab the shirt to shut it up. The balcony door is locked but I have practice. He's thundering at me now and maybe he's turned into the movie villain I thought he could be. My clothes go over the balcony and flutter down into the snow blanketing the yard.

"What are you doing, Adele." His voice is calm and he is close to me. "Those are Kristin's." In for a penny or whatever, so I throw one leg over the balcony. My skirt pulls up, but it's too dark for him to see anything. He's been stalking me so he's probably seen it anyway.

He moves towards me, but not fast enough. I jump off his balcony to the ground floor. The air rushes around me and I think this is what Trinity felt like in the *Matrix*. Then I hit the ground and sprain my ankle. The fall is unimportant: my rescued clothing returns the favor, cradling me on the snow.

My ankle hurts too much to hop up and run inside, arms full. I hope I left the patio door unlocked and I hope he will not try to chase me. I'm sure he is crazed, my crazy stalker, stealing all my clothes and watching me nap. I look up at him and he looks sad and confused. I look like a girl at a party, skirt all flounced out around me. "I'll call Alan," is all he says and I wonder why does he have Alan's number?

He looks at me and I think I see the shining track of a tear on his face reflecting the porch light. I want a tear to fall off his face and land on mine. Maybe I look like Kristin did when she left. Maybe he is crying because I took all his souvenirs of me. I throw the clothes onto my patio, then I crawl toward the patio door and it is open. I crawl inside and bring my clothes with me, and I can almost hear how happy they are to be back. I lay down against the liquor cabinet in a wet, snowy nest and take swigs from the gin bottle. I won. I get to celebrate.

Alan gets home and the look of worry on his face surprises me, but then I smile drunkenly and I lean my head back. He puts a

blanket over me. I can see Dave behind him in the hall and I try to explain but nothing I say makes sense to him.

