

Double Fake

Flash Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder
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"Com'on, com'on." Eleanor was the last of Jane's friends to leave for the elevator, the others having given up more easily. "We'll share some wings, the boring kind you like that won't make your head sweat, pretend to be laughing at each other while we scope out guys pretending to be laughing at each other, watch American Idol on the big screen, and walk..." She stopped, Jane's negatively shaking head having finally made its point.

"Thanks," Jane smiled back at her, not wanting to rule out a rain check, "but I've got stuff to do. Lots of stuff."

"Yeh," Eleanor nodded, her eyes twinkling in the process, "I know all about 'stuff.' See you tomorrow," and she ran off to the "bong" of the elevator doors opening.

"Thanks for your help!" Jane shouted after her, to which Eleanor responded by waving her right arm, but without turning around.

True, Jane really didn't like getting home late without enough time to do things around her small apartment before she went to bed. But this wasn't about the droll evening routine of an entry level program analyst on the 23rd floor in carrel #2308. No. Tonight was all about Steve.

Meanwhile, back at the elevators, and the one in particular into which all five of Jane's friends were squeezing themselves, their over-sized purse-bags and briefcases...

"Ewww," Rona whispered way too loud, turning as she got on to avoid making eye contact with the two loose-tied young men in the back.

"Ladies," one of them named "John" greeted them politely, his eyes focused on Eleanor's as she looked up and then away before any of her friends noticed as the doors closed behind her.

Steve – carrel #3116 and fellow-resident in the small apartment building where Jane lived – was 6' 1" with dark brown hair that fell wherever it pleased and blue green eyes, but his friendly good looks and melt-in-your-mouth smile weren't the point. It was the way the sound of his voice made her feel that gave Jane the resolve she needed.

Despite her best efforts, she'd never been able to get his attention. Not really. Sure, there was the occasional lunch in the company cafeteria, with others at the table. And they would take the subway and walk together on their way home now and then, window shopping for pastries along the way. They would talk, taking longer than they would have going home alone, but never long enough. "Tonight would be different," so said the determination on her face as she packed quickly, leaving the work she would normally take with her behind. Tonight she had a plan.

Steve, who had been working late every day for the past two weeks on a special project, was a closet American Idol fan according to an unidentified, but trustworthy source. He'd get home late this evening, order takeout to eat while he watched American Idol, and then do his laundry, which he always did on Wednesdays, later that evening. Problem: Tonight, Steve would arrive at his apartment, turn on the evening news as usual, only to find that his TV and Internet wouldn't be working. (She'd have to do something very nice – maybe some concert tickets? – for her cousin, Randy, twice removed, who worked for the local cable company.)

Quick to adapt, Steve would go down to the laundry room at 7:40 PM, enough time to stuff his darks in one machine, his underwear and towels in another, and call “#1 Son” before 8. The place would be empty, all the usuals being glued to their sets, watching the show from the comfort of pillowed sofas and over-stuffed chairs. Steve would just have to settle for the small screen that hung off the wall above the change machine.

The layout in this particular laundry room is important. First of all, it was small. “Cozy” is more like it. There were four washing machines, top loaders, two backing up to the other two, up against the wall on the right when you came into the room. Exposed pipes overhead, but who cares about that? Two dryers were side by side up against the back wall. And there was a folding table along the wall on the left. In the corner, between the folding table and dryers, there were two plastic chairs facing the TV which, as you know, hung above the change machine, diagonally across the room, in the corner next to the door. It was a metal door, mostly frosted glass, that took forever to close by itself, picking up just barely enough momentum toward the end to “thunk” shut all the way.

Jane arrived at 7:50, carrying a large plastic laundry basket, and smaller round one on top with delicate items she'd wash separately. “Hey, Steve,” she pretended to be surprised to see him, which she wasn't of course, but then was surprised to see him standing up suddenly as if he had been bending over and she had interrupted something.

“Hi.” He seemed flush, blushing in fact. “I... I was just...”

“Wait,” Jane decided to leverage the awkwardness of the moment in her favor. “Let me guess,” she said, doing nothing to hold back her giggling. “Thinking you'd be alone down here, you decided to wash the jeans you were wearing with your other clothes. ...How'm I doin' so far'?”

“Pretty much right on the money,” Steve smiled, trying to maintain his cool, pushing his balled up jeans into the suds and dropping the lid – “Bammm!” – of the machine he was hiding behind. “Maybe, I'll just stay here for a while.”

Putting her regular laundry in the one washer, Jane dumped the smaller basket in the other machine, looking up at Steve deliberately every chance she had, her lips unable to keep her nervous smiling under control. Taking one obviously deep breath, Jane put the small basket down on the black and white checked vinyl tile floor. Standing up, she reached with both hands behind and under her white “I know, I'm hard to believe.” t-shirt, her eyes looking right at Steve's. Neither of them was smiling just now. Unhooking it in the back, in one smooth,

carefully rehearsed move, she took off her bra under her t-shirt and put it in the open machine in front of her, lowering the lid slowly and carefully to hold the moment as long as she could.

Neither of them noticed that American Idol was well underway on the TV in the corner.

Reaching for the cell phone he'd put next to his wallet and keys on the short wall that separated the washing machines, he held it up, and then looked up before scrolling to the number he needed. "You like Chinese?" he asked Jane. And the rest of the night was, as they say, "history."

Early the next morning, a few minutes before they had to be at their desks, in the last stairwell before the roof of their office building, Eleanor was just lowering herself off her toes, pulling her mouth down and away from John's who still hadn't opened his eyes. "So," he asked, making an effort to regain his composure, "how was last night for Jane?"

"Pretty spectacular. She was almost incoherent when she called after he left this morning. ...And my \$20?" she reminded him as if he'd forgotten.

"No sweat." He pulled the folded bill out of his shirt pocket where he'd had it waiting for her. "Steve said getting her to take off her bra like that was worth every penny."

"Thanks!" Eleanor snapped the \$20 from him, finally stepping back a few inches. "And to think I ever doubted him when Steve first asked for our help. ...Com'on," she said, poking him in the stomach right through his tie. "We need to get to work."

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