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Roof Line

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ROOF LINE

Donald Francis

"I bought a house," Lint says. "I'm thinking of living in the attic."

Earlier, the woman says, "Janine, but if you want, you can call me Abigail."

Before that, she says, "Lint?"



The woman follows Lint around the gym for three days, all the time moving closer. Then she is next to him, on the treadmill next to his.



Lint stands looking at the house he lived in until he was twelve years old. He moves along the sidewalk, looking at it from different angles. The real estate agent says, "I'm not following."

Lint walks up the driveway and rings the doorbell. When nothing happens, he opens the screen, presses his ear against the door, pushes the bell again.

The real estate agent returns to his car. Lint crosses to the side of the house. He tracks the line of the bungalow's roof and the placement of its windows. He continues into the backyard.



"Top or bottom?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm just wondering," the woman says. "Are you a top or a bottom?"



As a child, Lint sits in the attic for hours. He likes it because it is dark and enclosed. He listens to the sounds below him, his parents talking, moving through the house. The television. His sister.



Lint says, "I have no idea what you're talking about."
"I figure you for a bottom. What I can't tell for sure is, are you straight?"

It is mid-morning. The gym is not crowded.



The house Lint buys has not been touched since the seventies. He hires a contractor to gut it and start over.

Lint often gets to the house early and climbs up to the attic through the hatch in a bedroom closet. He sits and listens to the sounds of the work. Some of the men don't like it, but there is nothing they can do. He's the owner.



"I know where you live," the woman says.

"How do you know that?"

"This cop I know? I had him run your plate."

"Why?"

"It's what I do."

"What is?"



Lint is in the attic the day his parents move to the new house.

"Louis," his mother calls. She is standing in the hallway just outside his bedroom door. He is not Louis. He is Lint.

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They walk to a bar not far from the gym. Televisions are mounted high on the walls.

"Do you like watching sports?" Lint says.

"I come here because I can smoke."

"I don't understand. Why do you have two names?"

"I'm trying them out, deciding which one I like better."



"Louis, are you in the attic?" Lint's mother has moved into his bedroom. Her voice sounds different because the furniture is gone.

"He can't be up there," his father says. "There's no ladder or anything."

"Well, where is he, then?"



Lint looks at the woman's face, then he looks at her breasts.

"You like them?"

"Were they expensive?"

"A client paid for them."

"You're a prostitute, then?"



The new owners walk through the house. Lint is still in the attic. He wonders if they will let him live there forever.



"Not a hooker. A role-play specialist."

"There's a difference?"

"No sex," the woman says.

"You're propositioning me not to have sex?"



Brenda, his lawyer, says to Lint, "You're crazy."
Lint says, "I don't want to work anymore."
"This is a mistake."
"Do you think so? I mean, really?"



When the contractor finishes renovating his house, Lint hires a different man to do the attic. He says to him, "I want to be able to stay up there for long periods of time."
"You mean, like, for hours?"
"For days."
"Why would you want to do that?"



The woman looks around, the waitress comes over. "Another one, hon," she says, indicating her drink. She takes the waitress's hand. "And be a doll. Get me a pack of Rothman's."

"We don't sell cigarettes." The waitress points with her other hand. "There's a store just down the street."

"I know where the store is, hon." The woman pushes something into the girl's hand, the one she is holding. "Here's twenty dollars. Go get them for me."

The waitress looks at the woman's hand holding hers, then at the woman's face.

"I don't know. I mean, I'm on shift."

The woman slides her hand up the waitress's arm, squeezes it. "Go."



Lint climbs up the ladder until his head and shoulders are through the hatch. A floor, a carpet, and track lights have been installed. A toilet is in the center, positioned under the highest

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point of the roof. Space heaters run along the outside. There's an air conditioner, sink, small refrigerator, microwave oven.

Standing back from the ladder, the contractor says, "The A.C. unit and the water heater are the kind they use in mobile homes."

"Geez."

"I wasn't sure what you wanted to do about sleeping. Getting a mattress up there might be tricky."



When the waitress returns, she puts the cigarettes on the table, then the change. The woman picks up a ten dollar bill, reads something on it. "That's your name, is it, hon?"

"Yeah."

"And what's this, your phone number?"

"Yeah."



Lint stays in the attic until the new owners leave the house. Then he climbs down the rope ladder he took from the gym supply closet at school. He is halfway to his parents' new house when his mother picks him up in the car.



After the sports bar, standing outside, the woman hails a cab. Lint says, "Where are we going?"

"One of my favorite places."

The woman sits with her legs crossed, lighter and cigarettes in her hands. "What are you going to do now?"

The cab is in a line turning left, which is going to take a while. Downtown Toronto, early afternoon.

"What do you mean?"

"Now that you've sold your company, what are you going to do?"

"Well, there's the house to think about," Lint says.



"Look around. I'll be trying on corsets."

The store caters to the fetish community. It is narrow, exposed brick painted white, which makes sense, Lint thinks, because almost everything for sale is black.



The real estate agent is standing at the gate. "I don't think we should be in the yard without permission."

"I grew up in this house," Lint says.

"Well, that's fine. Unfortunately, it's not for sale."

"I want you to try. If they won't sell, I need one that's identical."

"Identical?"

"Or very close. With an attic."



Lint watches the woman come out of a change room at the back of the store, followed by a young man. She is naked from the waist up except for a corset, which she inspects in front of a mirror. The nipples on her breasts are conical, almost puffy. She says something to the young man, who circles behind her, puts his knee in the small of her back and pulls the laces tighter.

"What do you think?"

"Who's he?" Lint says.

"Don't worry about him. He's one of the owner's boys."

"I see."

"Get this for me. Then it's your turn."

"My turn?"

"To buy something."



Lint's house is ready, but he has not moved in. He stays there

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sometimes, sitting in the attic, sleeping on an air mattress. The rest of the time he lives in his apartment and goes to the gym.



"You decide," the woman says. The question is what to do next.

"All right." They return to the gym, where Lint's car is parked.

Lint drives to the suburbs, an older subdivision. Bungalows. He stops, gets out, opens the passenger door.

"What is this place?"

"This is the house I bought."

Lint walks up the driveway, around the side of the house, into the backyard. The woman follows him. "Why don't we go in?"

The floors are refinished and waxed, the walls freshly painted. In the kitchen, the counter tops, appliances, cabinets, all new. Standing in the living room, the woman says, "Nice drapes. Where's the furniture?"

"I haven't moved in yet."

"Why not?"



Lint is not in the attic. He is in the living room. His parents are in the kitchen. His mother says, "I can't live in this house, anymore. I walk past her room. . . ."

"We'll move."

"I just can't."

"I'll call an agent. Who's the guy Jean and Wink used, you remember?"

Lint goes into the kitchen. "I don't want to move," he says.

"Oh, honey."

"Your mother is all alone during the day."

"I'll stay home."

"Oh, honey, I wish you could."

"This house makes your mother sad."

"I'm sad, too," Lint says.



It is night. The woman sits on the couch in Lint's apartment, the ninth floor.

"This is great furniture," she says. "You should keep this."

"Here's what I'll miss," Lint says, and walks out to the balcony. The view is of the roofs of houses.

"I don't get it."

"I come out here, think about, I don't know, life. The attics."

"Well, that's definitely not the weirdest I've heard. What do you do, jerk off?"



"But he's a boy."

Lint's sister says, "He's only nine."

Lint's sister and her three best girlfriends are eleven.

"He'll see."

"I get to play," Lint says. "You said I could play if I let you come up."

The attic is Lint's fort. Planks over beams, a blanket to sit on. An old lamp without a shade, extension cords linked together.

"If he's going to play, he has to keep his eyes closed. And no peeking."

"He'll peek for sure."

"No, I won't."

"We'll cover his eyes," Lint's sister says.

Lint plays, but he can't see anything. Later, when his underwear is off, somebody touches him. He flinches.



The evening air is chilly. Lint ducks back inside. The woman does not follow, so he puts on a jacket and goes out again. He offers her a sweater, but she shakes her head.

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"I lived with my father until I was sixteen," the woman says.
"My mother took off when I was little."

"My house? The one I showed you? I grew up next door."

"The corner house?"

"The other side. My parents sold it after my sister died. The day they moved, I hid up in the attic. They thought I went ahead to the new place. They thought I rode my bike."

"Really? It was close?"

"Pretty close, yeah."

The woman lights a cigarette. "I'm sorry about your sister." Lint reaches for the pack on the railing between them. The woman hands him the lighter.



Looking for the washroom, the woman walks into Lint's bedroom instead. Lint is in the kitchen.

"Lint," she says.

The woman is standing beside the bed, a single mattress on a low platform. There is no other furniture in the room. Two of the walls angle in steeply, almost meeting at the ceiling. The woman puts a hand on one of them.

"It's supposed to be like an attic, right?"

Lint nods. "I did it myself."

The woman removes her hand from the false wall, peers at the tips of her fingers, then looks at Lint.

"I should probably go," she says.