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RORSCHACH

Sharon McGill

My neighbor has hung a murdered blouse from the short cord in his window. He usually pins socks and neckties there to dry like dead worms, but today there's this blouse with a scream of blood staining the left side in jagged, red-brown shapes.

All I know of this man is his laundry, though I've never seen him hang it. He keeps the curtains closed. The window looks directly into my kitchen from a distance of ten feet over a well-like air shaft. There are no other windows on our level, and the view from the apartment beneath mine is too acute. I know this because the only person I've talked to in the building lived there, a man with some biblical name like John or Mark who fucked me in his kitchen. He said it would be sexy. It wasn't. John or Mark moved out a long time ago, but I remember the view there, and it was nothing like mine.

My job is to watch. I work as a security guard in an art museum, keeping people from touching things, scolding anyone for talking on cell phones or leaning too close to the walls.

I tell people I finally made it into a museum. The joke wasn't even funny the first time.

Sometimes I forget people come for the art. They could be actors in a silent show put on entirely for my benefit, a show about the way people look at things. Other times a viewer's gaze shifts from a canvas to my body, and it takes them a moment to understand that I am alive.

The blouse still hangs the next morning. I start calling the landlord and have most of the digits dialed when I hang up. She hates me because I painted a railroad bridge in the living room. But mainly I stop because all I can think to say is *The blouse across from me has been murdered.*

The language of art is homicidal. Ideas are executed. Paintings hung. Photos shot. My ex embraced this, called himself a shootist. *I don't photograph things. I shoot them. I am a shootist.*

He shot me several times, and my now dead body hangs in New York. He's art-famous, and I'm hanging in a bunch of galleries labeled as *Girl #5*.

In the museum, we have these Clyfford Still paintings. My favorite is a giant white field cut by a torn red shape in the upper corner. When you stare at it all day, the shape becomes a screaming mouth that is impossible to unsee.

The building is 150 years old. It was commissioned by the mad daughter of a rail baron who kept building it until her father's fortune ran out. The dim halls are filled with sepia shots of the city's dead history. The faces of people in them are blurred and bleached out, impossible to judge.

The laundry room is in the basement, a maze of corridors notched with heavy, mostly locked doors. I had always assumed the man across from me washed his clothes in the sink because he didn't want to venture down to the fleet of coin-ops next to the boiler room, a place that screamed like the antechamber to hell.

I knew the passage to his wing was there, so I went and tried all the doors until I found the right one.

My ex took the shots in his studio with me on the floor and him hovering overhead on a ladder, a silhouette against bright lights. *Play dead*, he told me. I widened my eyes into an empty stare, arms and legs splaying at unnatural angles. He touched me only to spill my black hair around the floor. *Like rivers*, he said. *Think of Ophelia*.

What do you see? the docents ask the high-school groups and senior citizens and other would-be art connoisseurs. *A place to begin understanding is to start with that question: what do you see?* They answer, Black blobs. A guy with no face. A woman's body pushed against glass, her skin smearing like paint. A red necktie cinched around nothing, hanging from the ceiling like a noose.

When they ask what it means, the docents tell them, *That's not*

the point.

The stairs lead to a carpeted hallway like my wing with its buzzing lights and distant muffle of anonymous living. Here, too hang framed shots of the city as a boomtown, faded and distant. His door is like mine, marked by gilded, stencil numbers. I knock.

What do you see? A man older than I'd imagined, his face serious as suicide. He looks like a professor—philosophy maybe, something both essential and irrelevant. He studies me the way artists look at paintings with eyes that recognize rather than see.

It's winter. A knife-like wind stabs the windows down the hall. "Come in."

The apartment is a mirror image of mine. Dark parquet covers the floor, and the living room bleeds into a hallway, an efficiency kitchen at left.

"I know why you're here."

The door shuts behind me. On his wall hangs a shot of a nude woman, not me.

"You do?"

The place is deeply lived in—glowing lamps in small corners, antique sofa, a piano with its lid raised and keys yellow as teeth.

"Would you like a drink?" He pours a glass of wine. "You look like an artist."

The wine warms my tongue. "I live across from you."

"I know."

In the kitchen, light from my window outlines the blouse upon its wire hanger.

"You never open your curtains," I say.

What do you see? Knives on a magnet lining the wall. An antiseptic kitchen. I turn and find his neck behind me. Slow throb beneath skin.

He touches my chest in the place over my heart. "Yours are never shut."