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The Roommate

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The body appears on a Sunday and it appears in your bathtub. It’s a woman, somewhere between your own age and really old. She’s thin, bones protruding, elbows sticking out of her short-sleeved blouse inquisitively, collar bone curved like the side of a violin.

You’ve heard of this phenomenon. The government’s attempts at removing the bodies have been fruitless. They reappear until left where they’ve decided to rest and eventually dissolve without a trace. From all you’ve heard, it’s not necessarily unpleasant to house a body for a while. They don’t smell. They make no sounds. Still, you’re annoyed. The bathtub? It’s inconvenient. You order an expiration consultant.

How long will it take? you ask the bulky man in your bathroom. He inspects your tub with a concentrated frown, lips pursed.

Hard to say, he says and lifts her right arm, holding the fragile wrist carefully. His hand is covered with wiry black hairs. Even his knuckles wear small shrubs.

Nothing we can do but wait, he shrugs.

When he’s gone, you return to the bathroom and look at the woman. She seems content in her porcelain bed. Pale skin, old-

fashioned tweed skirt. You imagine she worked in a library. They've become redundant these days, but some nostalgics still cling to them and regularly drum up petitions to keep them open.

Your new situation becomes a nuisance when you need to wash your hair the next morning.

This is less than ideal, you mumble and bend over the sink, scooping handfuls of tepid water over your head. You throw the body an annoyed look. It's unimpressed.

When you leave work that night, you walk through empty streets. Few people use offices now. They stay at home to work remotely then stay at home to play online or meet friends in chatrooms. In front of your building, you are greeted by two racoons busily raiding the trash under a flickering streetlamp. They ignore you. The apartment tower looms over you in the darkness, stuffed with strangers, the black and white windows a disarranged chessboard. Inside, people live like pralines in a box—each wrapped in their little compartment, separated by walls and differences.

You go straight to the bathroom and check on the body.

Hello, you say quietly.

When you go to bed that night, you keep the bathroom door open. It feels almost as if someone's only sleeping next door.

On day two, you drink your morning coffee in the bathroom. It seems rude not to. On day three, you bring back Chinese takeaway—your weekly Wednesday treat. You drag one of your red folding chairs from the kitchen into the bathroom and set the food down on the bathtub's rim. Although the body's eyes are closed, it feels as if they're following your movements. You watch a football game together. Because you like to clean a little before you go to bed, you keep the bathroom door open and while you dust your two slim bookshelves and the generic metal couch table that comes with flats now, you tell her about your day—about your intrusive boss who looks you up and down whenever he talks to you, about your colleague who pretends you don't exist. The body listens patiently.

You get used to washing your hair over the sink. When you pass restaurants, you imagine what she might have liked to eat and buy it. You try sushi for the first time. Outside your building, the racoons still ignore you, but the way to the door seems shorter.

She might have liked music you decide one night. When you ask her, her face is as stoic as ever, but you've learnt to ignore her rigidity. You ask your Techmate to play something nice. The

system takes a few seconds to load as if surprised by this unusual request, but then plays a Leonard Cohen song. A choir fills the room, and a low, melancholy voice rises—low, melancholy words that come to you like arms around your waist, like hands that lift your hands, and you sway with them like strands of reed by the river, overcome by a warm wind or a storm, dancing to the end of love.

You know that she's gone before you turn around. Outside your hollow room, the stubborn night expands, the wind moans the woods to sleep, and you think of the racoons that you cannot see, only sense, beyond the unyielding walls of your house.