

The Strike

She really couldn't say what came over her that day.

Maybe it was the scene from her bedroom window as she folded laundry. Across the street, a neighbor pulled purple winter pansies and one by one, replaced them with red tulips, which in a few short weeks, would become a spectacular display of red beauties visible from any window in the house. Next door, another neighbor cleaned his grill for family steak night. It was "T-bone Tuesday." Two doors down from the red tulips, Cheryl Sanderson slid like a mink into her brand new Mercedes wagon. It was beautiful—white with tan leather interior—the exact model Cheryl had wanted. The effort Cheryl's husband Jeff had devoted to the vision in white totaled 623 miles, 7 dealerships, and 41 phone calls. He'd surprised her on Christmas Eve—and in the glove box, he'd left a letter he'd written listing the reasons he'd loved her from the moment he first put eyes on her, how her laugh always lifted his spirits no matter the circumstances and how he'd never forget that yellow sundress she'd worn on their first date.

She turned her attention back to her bed and surveyed her handiwork; the bed was completely covered with towers of neatly folded shirts in various colors and sizes, which, now that she considered it, looked like a city full of miniature skyscrapers. Downtown Cincinnati, maybe. She rolled her neck from side to side and listened to the bones popping and the crackle of what most certainly had to be cartilage, something keeping the bones from floating away right out into her bloodstream down to the bottoms of her feet. A chiropractor might be a good idea. Her low back ached from scrubbing the tub and

sweeping, and leaning over the bed to fold clothes had only made the pain worse. But the thought of another appointment jolted her out of her musings. What time was it?

She purposely avoided looking at the digital alarm clock on the bedside table. Something about the digital display of time reminded her of a race—a swim race or a half marathon—and so she always felt like she immediately needed to begin rushing around regardless of her destination, or of whether she even had one. She would not look at the stick-like numerals that always reminded her of the displays on the iconic ticking time bombs in the movies but rather, she'd check the kitchen clock instead. She found the undetectable, fluid movement of the minute hand reassuring, especially given the physical distance between the numbers. The oversized parisienne styled clock boasted eight or nine inches between the numbers and so a minute physically stretched further. She had one and a half feet before she needed to get the kids.

In the kitchen, she examined the countertops with the mental acuity that years of housecleaning experience brings. They were covered with a variety of crumbs in all sizes, shapes and textures. The evidence suggested that the kids had eaten Eggo waffles for breakfast, and that Dan had made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with corn chips for lunch. A few mushed up grapes that didn't make the lunch cut lay lonely near the edge of the sink. She grabbed a sponge and began wiping in large circles, and while she wiped, she thought of Cheryl. Of the Mercedes wagon and how Jeff had gone to such lengths to be sure it was the exact one she wanted— the E-63 AMG wagon in white with the tan leather interior. She smeared the mushy grapes around in angry circles thinking about the beautiful letter he'd written and she thought about Dan and the kids. She couldn't remember the last time they'd written her anything – a birthday card, a

valentine, or a smiley face on the kitchen note board—anything other than “need milk and toilet paper.” She pushed the morning’s carnage around in circles, and then suddenly she froze. She just stopped.

And without sliding the crumbs into the garbage bin or sink, she simply left them in a large “O” shaped swath. And that’s when it happened.

Day One

was difficult...at first. Piles of newspapers covered the floor by Dan’s recliner and a spiral shaped accumulation of late-night nail clippings on the bedside table paid homage to his nocturnal habit, which caused her to gag every time she passed them. Dust bunnies swirled like miniature monsoons around the legs of the end tables in the living room. The bathroom sink was an especially easy mark for dirt. The shell-shaped porcelain bowl which at one time she’d thought very beautiful had fallen victim to time and as it often managed to do, time revealed the ugly downside. The long interior grooves provided receptacles for grime and she now considered this a design flaw, perfect for collecting dollops of Aqua Fresh toothpaste which, by day 3, would need to be chiseled off.

Day 5

proved too much for the bathroom wastebasket, now overflowing with empty shampoo bottles, Q-tips and used tissues. The mirror was speckled with white spots—back splatter from everyone brushing their teeth and gargling. The kitchen was also

quickly declining. Dribbles of bacon grease covered the oven display, making it impossible to see the digital ticking time bomb display. The sink was full on one side already, and a rainbow of crumbs coated every horizontal surface. Day five and she was now having second thoughts. But that same day—day 5—she started *100 Years of Solitude* and read for 2 hours while she sipped on some wild mandarin oolong tea.

Day 10

a pale gray ring had formed around the tub where the kids took their nighttime baths. The sink now boasted a spectrum of blue and green: toothpaste, soaps, mouthwash, all encrusted with whiskers and all hard as diamonds. The mirror had so many speckles, some spots were actually in triplicate. The bathroom garbage had spilled onto the floor and a fresh batch of hair dangled from the edge like a long, hairy tail. On the way to survey the kitchen, she drew her name in the dust on the coffee table and wrote the words “I love you” with a large smiley face.

The kitchen was hands down, the stone-cold winner. There were now enough crumbs on the counters to qualify as leftovers. She was certain that if she collected them, she could feed their family of 4 dinner for several nights. The dishes were stacked in both sides of the sink now and also on the counter. There were 2 pots and 1 skillet on the stove. She watched a housefly as it lighted from one pile to another and another. She half chuckled and grabbed her gym bag. She was meeting Nancy for smoothies at 11.

Day 17

was not a turning point, though Dan had loaded the dishwasher. But he didn't wipe the counters or sweep, and both sides of the sink were crusted with an assortment of

dried foods which might require a metal scraper for removal. It was on this day she fully embraced the passive-aggressive virtue of her strike. Without hesitation or remorse or self-doubting, she fished a pair of scissors from the kitchen drawer. She'd mentioned to Dan on several occasions that the woven straw seats of the ladder-back chairs were falling apart.

“One night at dinner, one of us is going to fall right through the seat!” she'd told him.

But Dan didn't agree. “These are fine. No one is going to fall through.” His flat delivery had been customary, but was not well received.

She went over the chairs, all of which were unraveling in various spots, picked a chair at random and snipped a single reed of the woven seat. When she did, what tension remained of the already damaged weave snapped, sending the half-rotting reed whipping around the wooden dowel further unraveling the seat of the chair. She hadn't done anything malicious, she told Nancy later.

“All I did was help the inevitable along.”

Snipping a reed here and there wasn't doing anything that wasn't going to happen eventually anyway.

That day, they caught a yoga class just before lunch at the Puffy Muffin. Later, she finished her day with a hot pink gel manicure.

Day 23

began with the garbage bag bursting as Dan carried it out of the kitchen and into the garage. Coffee grounds covered the floor along with day-old milkshake, some spoiled lettuce and a single meatball rolled to the corner where it remained until day 41.

Even Sully, the family dog had had enough of the filth. He turned his nose up like some sort of pure-bred snob and padded off into the living room, content to lay in the swirling dust bunnies. Dan returned moments later with a dampened paper towel and moved the mess around in circles. She never uttered a word.

She stood in the kitchen staring at the crop-like circles of garbage residue Dan had “cleaned”. At some point, she didn’t know when exactly, she’d lost her voice. The one that praised, that protested, that reasoned and argued and stood up. Courtesy had given way to deference; “Would you prefer beef roast or spaghetti?” had become “What would you like for dinner?” “What do you think about a denim sofa for the den?” had become “Do you think we need a new couch?” and, “We need a new dryer” had morphed into “Do you hear a clinking noise?” For years she’d been the “one on the ground.” She’d made all of the household decisions, because *she knew what was needed*. But somehow, in her attempts to involve Dan, in her attempts to make him *care*, to give him a say, she’d given it *all* over to him. She had retained all of the household responsibilities but was no longer empowered to make the principal decisions. And so the family sat down, night after night, to the dinner of Dan’s choosing, on chairs whose seats would give way at any time. And what she had, representative of the far reaches of her ability to make any decisions, was a purple sponge and a fancy electric mop.

Day 29

brought torrential downpours and Sully had decided to roll around in the mud. It was perfect. He came in and tracked muddy paw prints through every room in the house. The muddy prints created a virtual dog treasure map; there were the prints to his food

bowl, then the prints leading to the cat bowl – just in case, then prints leading to the kids’ rooms to check for chew toys and then back down to the den to his bed where the prints twisted and turned while he got his position just right, but not before he shook the muddy waters from his nappy fur. The den walls were covered with shades of brown splatter and drips that ran. Simultaneously, she and Sully cocked their heads to the left and looked at it. It was familiar, reminiscent of a canvas at the Guggenheim, perhaps. She snatched a stray pencil from between the sofa cushions and scribbled Jackson Pollock at the bottom. She stepped back and smiled. Then she found the scissors and snipped another chair.

Day 37

required flip-flops to be worn in the bathtub. It occurred to her that bathroom at the gym might be more sanitary and so she decided on the days she went to spin class, she’d shower there. The kitchen was not any better. At some point she’d stopped foraging for a clean cup and switched to Styrofoam throwaways. Nancy’d said something about the importance of being green and she’d told Nancy that the only thing green was the shower. And the sink. And the toilet. And the meatball in the corner. They laughed pretty hard about the last one.

With all the filth and all of the messes, Dan hadn’t uttered a single word. He’d inquired casually about her yoga and mentioned she might try “hot yoga” but he never once commented about the condition of the house. All of the chores she’d cherished, all of the little things she’d thought mattered, mattered little or none at all. She was taking

showers at the gym and drinking from foam cups and Dan hadn't missed a beat. The thing she'd been seeking – a hint of acknowledgement or recognition of how she'd kept the house all these years – was of no more importance to Dan than the dust bunnies blowing around on the floor. Her devotion and caring were crumbs that only she could see. Until

Day 41

on the sofa reading the Sunday paper, she was absorbed in the latest book reviews when Dan, in order to see, turned down the right corner of the sport section and examined the living room and kitchen. Dan made a sound, barely perceptible, nonetheless, she'd heard it. A gurgle deep in his throat. Was it disgust? Was Dan, after 41 days, only now realizing...

“This house is filthy.” She turned down the right corner of the book review section.

“Mmm. Yeah I guess so...” her voice trailed, uninterested.

“I mean look!” Dan was excited. “Look at the floors! And the kitchen chairs!”

“Mmm. Uh-huh. Yeah, they're fall—“

She glanced over at Dan. He was wincing as though he was in pain, but he wasn't. The house had finally reached a level of filth – that of a McDonald's playland mid-flu season or the restrooms at the Waffle Den (no soap, no toilet paper, no problem) – that even Dan couldn't tolerate. Even Dan had limits. A threshold. A line had to be drawn somewhere. It'd been 6 weeks. She watched as he curled the top corner of the sports section down on the left, then down on the right and again on the left. His field of

vision captured it all; the muddy paw prints, the den wall, the crumbs and dust bunnies and grease splatters and the unraveling chairs.

He folded the paper slowly and stood.

“I’m going to clean.” was all he said.

He tossed his newspaper on the floor by the sofa. Just as he always had.

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