

She slipped out of the satin covers, head groggy from the shifting lunar phase. Thirst clouded her senses, and she failed to notice that he was gone. The bedroom door stood only a few short steps away. Her fingertips brushed against a wall. The surface felt wrinkled and uneven. Zora's sluggish feet navigated through blackness, pivoting on edges of stairs that spiralled into the scanty kitchen. She wiped rheum from corner of her eyelid, the thick crust crumbling like an anthill. Her face wrinkled with disgust, as she wiped the mucus on a piece of her nightgown.

At the bottom of the stairs, she transitioned from fuzzy carpet to frigid linoleum—the shift in temperature turned her skin into goose flesh. The kitchen reeked of sewage. Patches of dim lustre appeared on the sandstone walls, created by street lamps outside. Plagued with insomnia, she leaned over the sink, peering through the kitchen window and avoiding nasal breaths. The garages were vandalised with graffiti that resembled hieroglyphics. *I swear this town only breeds hooligans and perverts.*

Zora swung the fridge door ajar and grabbed a can of Hobgoblin (*Hemoglobin*, as she'd liked to call it), her preferred brown ale. Air hissed as she cracked the tab open, watching white foam spill around the rim. She gulped beer in frantic draughts, quenching her thirst. *Nothin' like a cold one in the middle of the night!* A beast of a belch sprinted up to her throat, but Zora suppressed it.

Then she heard shallow breaths. They echoed from shadows in steady rhythms, out there, tucked in darkness. As she lifted her gaze, the refrigerator light illuminated a static figure of a lanky man, looming next to the appliance. A blank expression was plastered over his sunken façade.

"Fuck!" she said. The red and blue can, sprinkled with condensation, slipped out of her fingers and crashed onto the floor—exploding ale all over the linoleum. Wading through a carob-coloured river of alcohol, she cursed again and pulled a rag from the cupboard under the sink.

"Thanks a lot!" she said. "The kitchen will stink for the rest of the night! I wish you'd stop creeping up on me like this. Yes, we're married now, but I don't know if I'll ever get used to your nightmares." She shook her head.

The man failed to respond. His ape-like arms hung loose by his hips.

Zora knelt, bruising her skin as she cleaned. "Ouch! You should be mopping up this mess, it's your fault!" She flung the rag at him, expecting a catch or some other sign of instinctive reflex. The soaked cloth collided with his worn T-shirt, leaving a stain before falling on the floor. He said nothing—a pillar of silence.

Zora massaged the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry. You just startled me, that's all. Let's go back to bed." She reached for the man's wrist, guiding him upstairs into the bedroom. The door creaked when Zora nudged it with her shoulder. "Get in there, let me tuck you in."

Like a house built on matchsticks, the man folded onto the mattress. She cuddled next to him, waiting in vain for sleep to take her.