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The Girlfriend Who Locks Doors

Nobody plans on being the girlfriend who locks doors. Petulant girlfriends lock doors, women who pout when the smallest thing doesn't go their way. Or angry women. I'm angry. But nobody wants to be on either side of a locked door, and it's worse if you lock it.

It feels like I'm waiting for him, even when I'm not. Even when we're together, doing things I want to do, things he's only doing because I asked him to do them, which I appreciate. But I want to know where he goes. He doesn't understand. I'm right here, he says, but he isn't, not really. So one time I followed him. Not mentally or spiritually. Physically, I followed him. I didn't have a good reason or even an intuition. I figured if I couldn't follow his thoughts, I could follow his car, so I did.

He was leaving work. He always leaves at the same time, regardless of how much work he has to do. I parked on a side street where he wouldn't see me and waited with the car running. It felt, I will admit, good. Not the lack of trust. That felt bad. It seemed a harbinger of dark days ahead, which I was in no mood to consider. Doing something felt good, taking control. I sound like daytime talk shows. Maybe they have a point.

He carried his briefcase—messenger bag, I should say, though it was pointlessly disguised to look like a briefcase—and the travel coffee mug he brought to work. He only drank good coffee, which he discussed with the condescension and self-regard I'd assumed to be limited to wine drinkers. Some of the vocabulary was even the same. He told me a bean tasted *rainy*. I was just beginning to accept *earthy*. When I suggested that maybe the bean got rained on, he narrowed his eyes. Through considerable effort, I resisted the temptation to scoop his eyeballs out of their sockets with my index finger.

The travel mug was long empty now, but he still cradled it. How strange his affections are. I was tempted to say men's affections, but what does this man have to do with the species? Not all men obsess over coffee, to say nothing of his other consumption habits that bordered on stereotype. He favored—and drank in unimaginable quantities, seemingly without effect—*craft beer*. He only drank *small batch* bourbon, favoring *single barrel*. How long had these adjective-noun combinations existed? They constituted several of the words he spoke on a given day.

He tossed the briefcase on top of his car. It was a shitty car. He was too young for a mid-life crisis. He's eleven months younger than I am. There's one month, the shortest month, when we're the same age. I'm prepared, when we're both thirty-nine years old, to murder him if he says one thing. But we're still a while from thirty-nine years old. He opened the driver's side door. It seemed, for a moment, that he would drive with his briefcase on top of the car, but he rolled down the window—he owned the last car in America with windows you manually roll down—and pulled his briefcase into the car. I shifted into drive, and we were on our way.

I didn't have any expectations. Or, if I did, I muted them to the point where they were inaudible. Although I'd initially taken pains to hide, I didn't disguise myself once I was following him. Most of the time, I kept one car between us, which seemed buffer enough. He was a messier driver alone than he was with me, bolting through yellows and drifting across lanes. If he checked his mirrors, it was only to look for a cop. I could have been right behind him, and he wouldn't have noticed.

At first, he appeared to be going home, which would have been a disappointment. I didn't want to see him with another woman—didn't even suspect this—but I didn't want my effort to be in vain either. I'd crossed a line I couldn't uncross, even if I did so thoughtlessly. When he turned left where he should have gone right, I knew something would happen. I turned on the car radio. There were too many things happening in my head.

The parking lot was practically empty. It consisted mostly of empty coffee cups. He stayed in his car. I prepared myself for anything: drug deal, prostitute, drug deal with prostitute. Was my boyfriend the dealer or the dealt? Was he the hooker or the john? He rolled up the driver's side window and then the passenger's side. He opened his door and dangled a heavy leg over the asphalt. I recognized that leg from the side of our bed. That leg could hover a long time before finding ground.

This time he didn't wait long. He wanted to be wherever he was going. I wanted to be there too, though leaving the car felt like a second, brighter line. The experience would go from something arguably whimsical to something darker. Still, it didn't feel like a choice to remove the keys and place them into my purse. I considered leaving my purse in the car, as if this would contribute to my disguise, as if he might say, That looks like my girlfriend, but where is her purse?

I was parked on the street adjacent to the parking lot, but I could see everything. He walked from his car to the building in no rush. It was impossible to tell from the car what kind of building it was, what one bought or did here. It might have been a bowling alley or post office or bar. Probably, it was a bar. Nobody else was entering or leaving this building. I needed to wait a while. I couldn't just go barging through the door with no sense of what waited on the other side. What if it was an AA meeting? What if it was a séance? Would I be the ghost?

Time passes slowly when you're deciding whether to follow your boyfriend into an unmarked building. I looked for another entrance but couldn't find anything. Tentatively, I stepped out of the car and made my way to the door, waiting the whole time for him to appear and say, What are you doing here, who invited you, are you following me? I didn't have the answer to these questions.

The door was lighter than the situation called for; it burst open, dousing the dark room with late-afternoon sun, though nobody turned around to see who was responsible. I quickly worked my way to the table farthest from the bar, where a candle obstinately attempted to extinguish itself. It would be hard to order a drink, as my boyfriend was the only person sitting at the bar. His drink was already half-empty. The only other person in the room was the bartender, who—in unconcerned violation of the smoking ban—lit a cigarette off another faltering candle.

There was no hope of maintaining anonymity. I would have to find a way to justify my existence, as if such a thing were possible! I lowered my head. It was a pose that suggested contemplation, though I didn't want to draw attention to myself. I'd been accused of having difficulty *not* drawing attention to myself, an accusation I resented for its ring of truth. My boyfriend stared ahead steadily. If he was waiting for someone, it didn't seem urgent.

I considered approaching him. Perhaps I could muster a low-grade hilarity to disguise the fact that I'd followed him. But a funny thing happened: He refused to discover me. No matter how openly I shared the space with him, he would not see me. It seemed deliberate, but the longer I stayed at my corner table, the more relaxed he became. Possibly, he was a little drunk.

When he left for the bathroom, I hurried to the bar. I didn't think about it: I just moved. I ordered whiskey, thinking it would be quick, but the bartender wanted to chat. Did I want Irish whiskey or Protestant whiskey?

"Irish people can be Protestants," I said idiotically.

“Orangeman!” he shouted. “Orangewoman.”

I turned to the restrooms.

“You know him?” he asked.

“What?”

“Your secret is safe with me. Mostly safe.”

“Irish whiskey, please.”

He poured Jameson into a rocks glass. He didn't ask about ice. He may not have had any.

“Maybe a double,” I said.

I got back to the table before my boyfriend returned. He sighed, as if ready to launch into a long confessional, but then simply lifted his glass. He never drank this quickly at home. The man I was observing wasn't the same one I lived with, though I don't know why I expected them to be. I wasn't the same person he lived with either.

He didn't turn around when a man walked through the door. The man walked purposefully to the bar, where he sat beside my boyfriend. There were many open stools. The man ordered a beer, and he and my boyfriend drank in shared silence until the first dull notes of a song materialized. It was a famous song, though I couldn't find anything to admire in it. I didn't understand these songs that wallowed in their own misery, that never came up for air. Or, I understood the songs fine, but didn't see why anyone should want to listen to them. The man started singing, and my boyfriend smiled. I wasn't prepared to have a gay boyfriend. *Earthy!* He was shaking his head now. I recognized that motion: It meant that's a good one. What was a good one?

The bartender looked at me. I couldn't help but look back. He smiled. Why was everybody smiling? I didn't feel happy, yet my face was smiling back. I actually touched my cheeks when he turned away. I felt betrayed by them. I felt hot from the whiskey and guilt. If I hadn't come, none of this would be happening. Or, it would be happening, but I wouldn't be seeing it. I wouldn't be getting the wrong idea. I still had faith in the wrong idea. It seemed my best hope.

I was ready for another drink. It was hard to say how much I was feeling this one without standing up, which is exactly what I intended to do. The bartender looked at me again, as if to challenge me.

A third man entered the bar, and once again nobody acknowledged him. He sat in the empty stool beside my boyfriend and signaled for a beer, though the bartender was already pouring it. I wondered what elaborate ritual would have to take place before he spoke to my boyfriend, who was no longer shaking his head but back to drinking. He appeared to be slowing down. Whole minutes passed between sips, or so it seemed. I had no sense of time and was too frightened to check my phone. The clock in the bar had only moved once and moved backward.

The third man—wasn't that a movie?—reached across the bar for his glass. He didn't acknowledge my boyfriend, who was talking to his friend, a person I had never met over years of dating. The third man kept to himself. It seemed increasingly likely he had nothing to do with my boyfriend or his friend, that—like me—he was an uninvited guest to their rendezvous. Then a fourth man entered and a fifth and a sixth. The music got louder, and people started entering two at a time, all men. My boyfriend and his friend were still talking, though it was too loud to hear anything. With the unexpected security of anonymity, I wondered what I was doing here.

I knew why I came. I came because I was bored. I was tired of things I had no right to be tired of. My boyfriend wasn't bad to me, but where was the triumph in that? Maybe I preferred him gay. It gave our listless love life—what magazine produced that alliteration?—an excuse I wasn't likely to find elsewhere. He wasn't gay, though. I wasn't getting off that easy. He'd switched drinks, and I had the strange idea this would make him more sober, that there was an elixir that would undo what he'd come here to do.

He pushed off his stool, and I plotted my second trip to the bar. I could reach the far side without being noticed. I was sliding off my own stool when I noticed he wasn't walking to the bathroom. He was walking toward me with a wide, misshapen smile. I studied my empty drink. I studied the wall. I could hear footsteps, and then I couldn't.

It took me a while to process what had happened or was still happening. When I raised my head, he was nowhere to be found. Not at the bar or by the bathroom or opposite me. I hurried to the bar.

"Cigarette," the bartender said before I opened my mouth.

"He doesn't really smoke."

"Who does?"

I didn't like the clothes I was being fitted for. The crazy girlfriend. The needy, out-of-touch girlfriend. The girlfriend who locks doors. Had he and his friend been talking about me the entire time? Were they continuing the conversation—did it ever stop—over a cigarette now?

"He likes you," the bartender said unconvincingly.

“Ha!”

He poured a whiskey and pushed it across the bar speculatively. When had I become so frightening to men?

“Tell you what.” But I had nothing to tell.

I found an empty stool at the end of the bar. To my left were three guys who didn't so much as look up at me. To my right was a wall. For no particular reason, I tapped it with my knuckle. Then I was sort of punching it. Still, nobody looked. My boyfriend didn't come back. I nursed my whiskey in the manner of old men who have nothing to do but nurse whiskeys. It didn't seem bad being an old man. I considered it as a future career choice.

The bartender left me to my bleak corner. I didn't know what would happen next but felt unafraid. Also slightly drunk. Also excited. There was a chance my boyfriend might not come back, that he was en route to our apartment. Maybe his friend could become my friend. Although my boyfriend was still missing, his friend was sitting at the bar. I wanted him to buy me a drink.

“Do you think anyone will buy me a drink,” I asked the bartender, though he was helping someone else.

“Most girls—”

“Girls?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Sure.” I didn't know anything, which was the only thing I knew.

“If you want a drink—”

“I have a drink.”

I was living inside a fortune cookie. There wasn't a lot of room but there was plenty of air. If necessary, I could survive a long time before someone pulled me out.

My boyfriend's friend was not that person. My second whiskey tasted different from the first, and it occurred to me the bartender had watered down my drink, or at least poisoned it. I didn't blame him. I wouldn't want to deal with somebody like me, either.

“Is it always this busy or what?” I asked.

“What.”

“Wait.”

“You said, Or what.”

The bartender was tiring of babysitting me, but I wasn't tiring, not at all.

“That's just a thing people say,” I said.

“Okay.”

Okay meant: I'm done. I knew okay from my boyfriend, from any number of men. I hadn't come here to hear okay. I worked on my whiskey. I checked the door. I checked the wall. Minutes passed or possibly hours. At some point, I became the one who wasn't home. I took out my phone to see if he'd called. Joanna would call soon about the baby. I considered calling him, but I didn't want to sound drunk. That is, I didn't want him to know I was drunk, though he had nothing against my being drunk. I had nothing against his being drunk, so what was I doing here?

The buffer drinkers left to find their own girlfriends or another bar, and there was nobody between me and my boyfriend's friend. He raised his glass politely in my direction. I raised mine in his. To him, I was a vaguely drunk girl at the end of an emptying bar. There couldn't be any shortage of such girls. It wasn't a role I relished, even if I'd played it in the past, though I hadn't considered it playing anything then. It was just normal, the way anything is normal, though increasingly fewer things felt normal. I recognized this as my opportunity to say something. I looked to the bartender, but he pretended not to notice me. I sipped my drink inconspicuously.

“Do you have the time?” My boyfriend's friend asked me.

“Only the wrong time. I think they do that on purpose.”

“Who?”

“Bars, casinos.” I had never been to a casino.

“Casinos don't have clocks. Or windows. Casinos have a whole subterfuge strategy.”

Subterfuge strategy! I needed one of those. I considered asking him where you found one, though I didn't want to blow my cover. The bartender seemed to be implicitly supporting whatever I was doing.

"There are casinos everywhere now," I said. "I think I read that."

"Where would you read that?"

"That's just a thing people say."

He smiled. I couldn't tell if it was a real smile or a fake smile. He might not have known himself. Probably, he didn't care. I smiled back. I leaned into the empty stool beside me. I tried to do something flirtatious with my eyes, though it may have looked like I was convulsing a little.

"I have an idea," I said, though I didn't.

"Okay."

"It just came to me."

He signaled for another beer, which the bartender provided without raising his head. I guessed I had two more minutes of my boyfriend's friend attention.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

"And go where?"

"Go anywhere."

He took a long drink of his beer.

"I'm just kidding," I said.

"No, you're not."

I wasn't sure if I was, though it didn't seem fair for him to decide.

"What if we did, though," I said.

"That would be something."

"It really would."

I looked to the bartender, but he'd left to attend to the errands bartenders preoccupy themselves with during quiet stretches. This quiet was stretching longer. I thought about standing. I didn't stand.

“Fuck it,” my boyfriend's friend said after a long time of not saying anything.

“Fuck it.”

He smiled a slow-developing, self-satisfied smile.

“I think I'll just go to my car,” I decided.

I tried to gauge how drunk I was. It was a difficult question to answer. I couldn't gauge how drunk he was, either. I steadied myself on the wall with one hand. I used the other hand to pull down my coat sleeves.

I said, “I don't think—”

“No, don't.”

“Don't think?”

“You know what I mean.”

Why did men keep saying this to me? I knew exactly what they meant.

I said, “I really think I'll just go to my car.”

“Fine.”

“You're annoyed.”

I could have gone to my car like I said. That's what I should have done, if only to take a nap. It's difficult to say why I didn't. The easy answer is that I was lonely, but I'd been lonely for a long time. I was loneliest when my boyfriend was around. (I might have taken that from one of his sad songs—they aren't uniformly meritless.) I wasn't lonely in this moment, though. I sensed an opening.

Would he have invited me to his car had he known I was his friend's girlfriend? I decided early that he had no idea who I was, and nothing happened to dissuade me from that view. I followed him. It was a nicer car than I expected. Two doors but not because the car was small. I mean, it was small but sporty. You wouldn't call it a racecar. The car was obviously fast. It was obviously expensive. I could see why he wanted me to see the car.

“You have a nice car,” I said.

“Nice?”

“You're not one of those—”

“It's my brother's, so probably not.”

“Okay.”

“But nice?”

How fragile the male ego is, even when questioned indirectly! I wasn't about to praise my boyfriend's friend's brother's car. I leaned against the driver's side door. If this sent a certain message, I was indifferent to it. He appeared equally indifferent. I appreciated the relative indifference we seemed to be sharing. He might have been a little drunk, after all.

“Do you want to sit inside?” he asked.

“I'd like to take it for a ride.”

“I can't let you drive.”

“Sure you can.”

Was this conversation too sexual? It felt a little boring.

“Why don't you just sit inside, though?” he asked.

The seat was warm. It clung to my leg. When I lifted my leg, the leather made a tearing noise, but he didn't notice. He gripped each of his hands on the steering wheel. The keys were in the ignition. He pressed a button, and the doors locked loudly. In a movie, this is the moment where I would look to my lap and feel afraid, but I didn't do that and didn't feel that. I almost felt excited.

“All right,” I said. “Show me what it can do.”

“We need to go somewhere for that.”

I didn't say anything. He didn't say anything in reply. I pressed a particularly inviting button. The console whirred.

“I love that sound,” I said.

“Where do you want to go?”

I pressed another button. There was no sound this time, but something began to glow faintly.

“What does this do?” I asked.

“Because we have a few options.”

“Is it related to the air conditioning? Or the heat?”

I pushed a button with a blue border and a button with a red border. I turned a bulky knob. There was no end to the things I could push or turn. I don't know what my boyfriend's friend thought because I wasn't looking at him. Inside the car, every action had an immediate consequence.

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