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## Leftover Roses

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## Leftover Roses

He stumbled through the knee-high grass. Anything could happen in the woods of southern Indiana, and he figured he'd seen most of it in his forty-two years. He could negotiate just about any kind of landscape: woods, bog, sand. How to get himself into the lake in front of him, that was the problem at hand. Could he get himself sufficiently dry by the time he got home to avoid a tongue-lashing from that shrew he'd married? Shit, he thought. I'm a grown man. I don't have to answer to anyone.

Think again, he could hear her say.

Okay, so time for plan B. How about this: he'd jump in for a quickie swim, wash off the smoke of the bar, dry himself in the grass and go home as if nothing unusual had happened. It sounded like a plan.

Unfortunately, the grass wasn't cooperative that particular evening. While the moon strayed behind clouds, he rolled over the carpeted ground, oblivious to the mud that bubbled nearby. He nearly wept to feel the softness of the grass on his rough hide, so he didn't much notice when his rolling missed its path and headed into stickier territory.

The moon emerged just in time for him to catch a glimpse of the mud spread over his skin: he was iced like a church-bazaar cake. He cursed his wife, the moon, the lake. Tramping toward his clothes, he tweezed them up with his fingers, then slid on the slippery ground and landed — shit! — right on his ass again. The clothes, well, they were goners. He marched into the water one last time. He dove under, slime and all, and dunked his clothes with him. If he was going home wet, he was damn well going to be clean about it.

He squeaked back into the soggy shirt and trousers, giving up on shoes and socks. A man had to know his limits. He dragged his waterlogged body homeward, sprouting goose pimples as the night air hit his body. His naked feet collected loose grass and weeds as he stamped a trail through the fields. All the time he was hoping against hope that he wouldn't see lights in the windows. He crossed the fingers on each hand.

But it wasn't going to be his lucky night, he saw as soon as he came in. One thing about the woman, she made you realize where the expression "beauty sleep" had started. She sure looked like hell. His only hope was a play for sympathy: he'd tripped on the steps and plunged into a puddle, rowdy youngsters from roundabouts had taken him for a ride, he'd been pushed by a...well, he'd come right out and say it, a drunk who'd had some rotten luck at cards that night.

He went with the third version. Three's a charm, he figured. She looked skeptical but didn't say a thing either way. He went on his way to clean up for bed. Didn't look like he was going to have to sleep on the floor again tonight, thank the maker. He stripped back down, flinging wet clothes wherever, caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he hummed. The lipstick was still stuck to his cheek. His heart stopped. He was a goner. He scrubbed it fiercely, leaving his skin ruddy and raw. Sure enough, he peeked down the hall, and there were his blanket and pillow, heaped on the floor.

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His back cracked loud enough to wake the cemetery down the road and he knew it was time for...well, for something. That was for sure. He couldn't afford another night like this. A groan escaped as his eyes wandered toward the clock. Six a.m. already. And no chance she'd be cooking him breakfast today. No sirree. He was on his own. On the other hand, though, it meant he could avoid the quivering mess that passed for oatmeal around this place. He puttered around, searching for quickly fixed edibles. He settled on a Sweet Success shake. It was girlie food, but it was fast. He only had ten minutes before he had to start up the truck and head over to the plant.

Can in hand, he tried the bedroom door. Locked, of course, but he'd had to try. He stumbled through the bathroom. Where'd she keep that damn blow dryer? It sat atop a pile of cosmetics fit for Tammy Faye Baker herself. Shit, he thought. This is what I work all day for? Who the hell's she need all this for? I sure never see it. Grumbling, he shoved the plug into the outlet and commenced drying his clothes of the past evening until they were at least tolerably damp, dry enough to slide on.

Think of something happy, he told himself. He had to move it or lose it this morning. Something to get him going... Last night, now that was a pleasant thought. Or it would've been, he was sure, if he could only remember it. Anyway, it didn't much matter. He always had a good time with Laury. Little Laury Lee, he always called her, even though she was only three years younger than he was. She seemed a whole generation away from his wife, though. Maybe 'cause she'd been seventeen going on forty since he'd married her. This Laury, though. She was a hot little number and she could drink him under the table, and at this point in his life these were the makings of a fine woman.

She worked for a construction company at their front desk. She was a receptionist, surrounded by men all day long, their taunts and teasing and touching, but in the evenings she chose to be with him. Well, at least two or three evenings a week, and for him, that was enough. Pride swelled in his gut as he thought about this. He remembered the day they'd met. Or, more specifically, the night. It'd been an unlikely enough place. He'd stumbled into the restroom, eyes still bleary with sleep. He'd survived all three acts without a snore, true to his pact, but he felt like his face was still snoozing. Just looking for a little bit of cold water to splash before he started the drive home, that's all he was doing. Just avoiding some squealing on the part of the missus by trying to drive this drowsy. And so it was that he met Laury Lee.

She was checking her lipstick, blotting it with a square of paper until it left a perfect echo of her sweet mouth. He had watched, silent, entranced. Her fingers flew through her hair as she spritzed, sprinkled and fluffed. It was like watching the Happy Painter on the public television stations or those chefs at Beni Hana's. The skill in those hands had hypnotized his eyes. It was only a moment, but in his memory the show took hours. In his memory, too, the woman with the swatting purse was missing, and the shrieks of surprise, and the sound of official footsteps approaching. But before he'd had to leave that moment, he had her lips and her phone number folded in his pocket.

A smile crossed his face as he pulled into a space. He knew what to do. He would pay that girl a visit she wasn't likely to forget. With a plan and a couple aspirin, he was ready to face the day.

His tires crunched over the gravel in the parking lot and his belly squirmed with anticipation. He didn't really have a plan yet, he was just going where the moment took him. His knees were weak as he stepped out of the pickup, and he had to keep wiping his sweaty palms over his worn-through Wranglers. He gulped down the dryness in his throat and strode toward the front door.

Dime-store bells tinkled as he stomped on in. Her face emerged from behind a People magazine, and her cheeks turned pink as posies when she saw his face. His voice was husky as he asked if he could have a word with her outside. A glance around for the boss, one last phone call to answer, and he had her and her reading material out the door. He led her to the lone tree near the lot, sat her down on his jacket, and raised his eyes to meet hers.

"Laury, there's something I need to tell you. Now just you wait until I'm through, then you can talk. There's some history between you and me, we go back, what, eight, nine months. Those months have been the best of my existence. You know my wife and me don't love each other anymore. Hell, I don't know if we ever did." His eyes wandered downward. "I don't know but I've ever loved anyone like I love you." His eyes hunted for a smile, and he halted. "I hope you feel the same way. Laury, I'm going to divorce her. Now, I'm not saying we gotta do this right away or nothing, but I want to marry you someday, and I want you to know that right now, up front." Her eyes were staring blankly at him, and he looked back toward the ground. He gingerly picked up the glisten of silver by his left foot and lovingly brushed off the dust, then held it to her left hand. "Will you — would you — marry me? Not tomorrow, but someday, would you do me the honor of being my wife?"

At this tender request she burst out giggling. He was still holding the washer, and she took it from his hand and slid it over her knuckles. "It's too big, sugar plum." She'd stopped laughing but her eyes were still sparkling. "What do you think that means?"

The heat in his cheeks forced his hands to his face. She'd taken this token of love and laughed? This wasn't how the morning had told him it'd be.

"Y'know, honey, there's a lot you and I don't know about each other. Eight, nine months of a couple beers and a roll in the hay don't mean we're ready to tie the knot. It's not that I don't like you, it's just that I'm not ready to go breaking the law for you. Last time I checked, it's illegal, marrying two people at once. I don't think my husband'd be too happy about me marrying some other guy. In fact, I think he'd be downright upset."

Her husband? His back stooped. His mouth hung open. She could've punched him in the stomach and it wouldn't have felt this bad. "Your husband." He tried to toss the words casually, to throw them off like he said them everyday. But they clumped, they stuck, they refused to come out smooth and clean. He tried again. "Your husband." This wasn't getting any better.

His fingers ripped the washer from her hand, scraping skin as it went, and he discarded it like a used cigarette, stamping it into the gravel. His feet took him back to the truck and his hands found the ignition key. He roared into reverse and gunned on out of there, streaming dust marking his departure. The truck picked up speed as it thundered into town. He wrenched the steering wheel left at Miller's and squealed to a

stop. He'd barely put on the emergency brake before his boots were headed inside.

A blonde with a decent face and a tired body guarded the only empty stool in sight. He plopped down, got himself a three-dollar beer, and downed it in one swig. A replacement was in his hand a second later and he closed his eyes as he gulped again. A pair of crossed legs down the bar caught his attention when he opened his eyes again. His feet reached for a hold on the floor but missed, and he lunged onto his neighbor. His hands grabbed her body for support and before he could right himself she was already turned around.

"You got plans for tonight?" Her voice was sweet as apple pie. His ears perked up and he got himself upright. He didn't let go.

"Good. My place is just down the way. You drive here?" He didn't have a chance to nod before they were out the door.

She was looking up from *Better Homes and Gardens* as he lurched through the front door. One glance, though, and she was right back in that magazine. What was she doing out in the living room at a time like this? The thought occurred to him momentarily. But he didn't care. Tonight he didn't have to worry about how he looked, how he walked, what he said. Tonight he was a free man. He'd made his declaration of independence.

Speaking of declarations, look whose lips screamed with red lipstick. He had to stop and look again just to make sure he'd seen right. Yup, she sure as hell had that goop plastered across her face, thick enough to choke a dog. Well, not quite that bad. In fact, he had to admit to himself after a moment of wide-eyed watching, she still cleaned up pretty good.

"So, what's the occasion? Hot bridge date tonight with the girls from church or what? Jesus, I haven't seen you wearing that Avon shit since...well, when'd I get it for you? Last Christmas? The one before? Damn, can't even recall that far back." He shook his head to himself, which didn't help his sloshing brain a bunch. He groaned with the sensation of drowning, and she finally looked back up at him.

"Yes?"

"You heard me, woman. What'd you do tonight? Paint the town red or what?"

"I stayed home and watched television. There was a good miniseries on, one of those Danielle Steele things. Then I read for a while. Now you're home."

"So why on earth've you got that stuff on your face? Hell," he realized with a start, "your hair's even been curled! You been up to something! Come on, you can't lie to me. What's going on?"

She just shook her head and tried to contain a sly smile. Normally, he wouldn't have noticed a thing, but tonight, for some reason, he couldn't stop watching her. Just ignore her, he told himself. She's messing with your head. You're falling into her trap like a big dumb bear, lumbering along just waiting to get caught. You get yourself to bed, she'll give it up, everything gets back to normal. End of discussion.

He headed toward the bathroom with one last glance toward her. She refused to look up, to meet his eyes, and he growled to himself as he stripped down for bed. He clomped around, searching for some clean pajamas. They weren't under the pillow, under the bed, and those sure as hell weren't clean ones stuffed into the hamper. In fact, it seemed to him, the hamper was fuller than usual, and full of only his clothes. He

flung clothes from the top, looking for a bra or a pair of underpants, but no luck. Not even a stray sock, missing its mate. The pile splayed over the carpet of the bedroom by the time he hit bottom, and he yelped with frustration.

"What in the hell is going on here? Can't a man get some clean pajamas anymore?"

He'd expected a coarse yell, but all he got was a calm "I just haven't had time recently. I'll get around to it."

The woman had sure taken some notions into her head lately. "And just what am I supposed to do in the meantime? Sleep in the buff?"

"Washer's empty now if you want it."

He'd heard stories of this sort of thing happening to other men. It was those damn women's magazines putting ideas in her head. Women's lib and all that bologna. Well, it'd be a cold day in Hades before he'd be caught dead doing the wash. He adjusted his boxers and sauntered into the bathroom.

That mirror sure wasn't flattering this time of night. He made a mental note to get that thing fixed. Made it look like he'd got some sort of beer belly, which of course he didn't, not with the fifty sit-ups he did every morning. Maybe he just needed some glasses. He peered closer and saw the hair on his chest had sprouted gray in a place. Gray? Already? He changed angles, watching himself spin slowly in reflection. No, it wasn't the light; the color was the same no matter which way he turned. It was only a sudden wave of will that let him grasp his wife's pliers — no, tweezers, that's what she called them — and yank it away. It floated into the sink and down the drain like a potato bug, swimming down slowly. He let the water run a while. He heard his wife move in the living room and felt his heart calm. At least he'd seen the tell-tale evidence before she had; at least he had some chance of pushing it to the back of his mind. He sucked in his gut and brushed his teeth, watching his middle in the mirror. Not a bad-looking man, even without clothes. Not bad at all. He splashed water across his dusty face and caught the towel on his stubble. Which was, frankly, nothing compared to the hair on her legs. When was the last time she'd shaved, he tried to recall. Too long ago, his tired brain told him.

He felt her slide into the covers smoothly, coolly. His nostrils perked with the scent of something fruity. He sniffed: perfume. He waited minutes, counting off the seconds to himself, until he deemed it safe. His body rolled over, as if of its own accord, just sleeping. His leg brushed hers in the process. It was smooth. So was her nightgown. It was a satiny thing he didn't remember seeing before. Had he bought it for her? In red? He doubted it. He'd always preferred pink; he'd thought it was her favorite. But he pictured her in the red, him in the bed, her walking towards him, and he liked what he saw. Not a bad color after all.

The other side of the bed was cold when he woke up. He snorted, rolled over, saw the clock. Still eight minutes to go before the alarm. What the hell was she doing this time of the morning? Not like she had anything important to do all day but spend his money anyway; no need to get up early to do it.

His eyes closed but he could tell it wasn't going to work. Six miserable minutes left. He figured it up in his head. Three hundred sixty seconds he could be sleeping, huddled safely under the blankets, and here he was, thinking. What a waste. Of



course he wasn't going to get out of the bed at this point. Five minutes to go. No time to get a shower before the alarm went off, and he sure as hell wasn't carrying his dripping body into the bedroom in the middle. He'd never hear the end of it.

He could hear tinkering like a color, pale and vague. From the kitchen, naturally. Maybe she was making eggs and bacon, like those first few months. He felt the spit well up in his mouth and sniffed, hoping to confirm his suspicions. Those first few months she'd laid out his clothes on the bed while he'd still been sleeping. He'd wake up to the chime of dishes in the kitchen and stumble out for a kiss. Her face had been shining in those first months. She hadn't cared about the roughness of his face or the tousled hair or pajamas half-unbuttoned from the heat of their bed. In those days she never wore her curlers in the mornings. In those days it wasn't flannel nightgowns and cotton underwear at night.

The smile on his face stretched into a grimace as the alarm sounded. He crawled out toward the shower, almost feeling his tail dragging behind him. Another day, another dollar, that's what his daddy'd said every morning of every day of his life. Except his daddy died at fifty, still faithful to his wife and making little more money than he had when he'd started out. That thought heavy on his mind, he climbed headfirst into the day.

He had to twist the steering wheel toward home that night, veering away from the Nite Lite Motel. That truck had a mind of its own, but he couldn't afford too many more expeditions. He'd have a hard time explaining where all his paycheck'd gone when mortgage time came around next week. Besides, he was tired.

The radio was blasting away, some band with a name like Metalicdeath or Megametal, he forgot. The younger guys around work had told him that's what they listened to, and not to be left in their dust, he'd changed his radio presets. Didn't want to be caught being old. So he tried to follow the words and the chords and ended up half-deaf by the time the clouds on the driveway announced his return.

The slam of the screen door didn't cause the usual shout, so he figured she was out. He headed for the fridge for a beer and turned the tube to CNN. It wasn't until he got up for a second that he noticed the flowers on the table. Roses, and red ones at that. Well, he sure as hell hadn't been the one to send them. His heart clamped: today wasn't some particular day, was it? Her birthday, or worse, their anniversary? He forced his mind to pump through the adrenaline but came up empty. No, that wasn't it. Then his eye landed on the card. "For My Love" was the caption. From her mother? He didn't think so. His mother-in-law was a little on the queer side, sure, but even she wouldn't have sent a card like this. He slid it out of the holder, loosening a few petals in his hurry. They floated onto the doily protecting the table and waited while he read. "Yours Always, P."

This didn't look like the kind of thing one of the girls would send. It wasn't the usual casserole recipe, that was for sure. The furrows in his forehead appeared as he wondered. Why on earth would someone send his wife flowers? He didn't even send his wife flowers anymore. And roses, to boot... It was beyond him this afternoon. A headache thumped, threatening, and he returned to his Lazy Boy.

He'd been asleep for quite a while by the time she tiptoed in. He hardly had time to run his arm along his chin, checking for drool, before she was back

in the bedroom. His face wore the indents of the corduroy chair, which didn't do much to make him feel less foolish as he straggled down the hall.

Somehow she'd slipped past him, into the bathroom, so that the room was empty by the time his feet crossed the line from green carpet into blue. But this was a good thing, he told himself. He would pull himself up, the man of the house, rooster of the roost, and he would not ask questions. He had no need. Was this not his wife, the woman who had vowed to love him for better or for worse? Certainly she had been busy with some charity work, some service to the community, which had kept her out so late. He had no reason to doubt his wife. She was faithful as a dog, he told himself. No reason to fear.

And so it was that his eyes were closed and his feet buried under covers when she slipped in beside him. He felt her toes probe the sheets and find his shins, then draw back. He sent his own foot toward the coolness of her side, exploring. But her breathing was even, normal. She was still awake, and he pulled away. His ears sharpened in the darkness as his eyes adjusted and he waited. He held his own breath, listening for hers, counting the rhythm to himself: one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi, breathe, one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi, breathe. When he heard her gulping air, he knew it was safe.

He stole into the kitchen. The purse was hunched on a corner of the counter, half-zipped. His toes nudged the carpet, careful of furniture, and dragged forward. The light was too dangerous, he'd decided; it could escape into the hall while he wasn't looking and creep under the crack that separated the bedroom door from the floor. He circled once, looking, staring until his eyes hardened, dry with air. No one. He cradled the purse and whispered to it. No noise, he said. The hinges heard and obeyed, letting him pass into the garage.

The door securely fastened, lights were safe. The cold leaked through the stoop and into his boxers, but only his skin took notice. His eyes were busy following his fingers. They caressed, smoothed, fondled the kleenex, credit card receipts, business cards, smudged lipstick cases. He would not allow them to rearrange, not yet. He needed a feel of locations, placement, to help him later.

Once ready, his fingers found the receipts again. He scanned them: nothing suspicious. KMart, the grocery, some prescriptions. No restaurant, mail-order toy, motel. A compact, some chapstick, a dried-up pen — everything was innocent. He huffed with frustration until he felt the pocket. The zipper stuck, giving him a moment's panic, but it gave way. Here was what he would need, a note, a picture. His fingers worked faster than his mind, but there was nothing. Even when he tested the space between the lining and the leather, nothing. He let his head fall into his knees, and it was only then that his feet alerted him to the cold. They were a purplish color, reddening when he stood. He fit everything back into the purse as carefully as stuffing the Thanksgiving bird and went inside. Feet still icy, he clambered into bed. She moaned once, then returned to sleep. His eyes stayed open.

His boss had asked him to work overtime tonight, first opportunity in three weeks. He guessed that it wasn't so much that business was slowing down as it was him that was slowing down. It'd been in the back of his head for a while, so he was relieved when he finally got asked again. As usual, he headed for the pay phone by the cafeteria



when the end of the day came, just for a quick break. But his fingers dialed home this time. He tapped his fingers against the metal casing of the phone while he counted the rings. Two, three, four, five...she wasn't home? At 5 o'clock, she wasn't home. He couldn't think what she could be doing, but he left it at that. He waited for her voice to finish the message and after the beep he decided to speak.

"Gotta work some overtime tonight. Be home around 10, 10:30." His voice cracked as it came up, dry and hard in his throat. "Hope that doesn't ruin dinner."

When he hung up the receiver his palms were sweaty and his cheeks were pink with heat. Must be a touch of the flu, he thought to himself, and went on back. Except the next five hours, he could hardly think of anything but home. There was some call of urgency from his gut, some push to get done and get out. It was, he puzzled to himself, a feeling of protectiveness he might have had for a child, if he'd had a child. A sense that something wasn't right, and that he was the only one who could fix things back again.

At 10:15 he was done, and at 10:22 his hands and face were washed, his hair was slicked back and his shirt buttoned up. The truck reared out of the parking lot, smearing gravel, and growled toward home. The fingers of his right hand fiddled with the radio as the left steered and somehow settled on the classical station. Maybe he'd just tired of searching. At any rate, it was some piano music by a French guy, he knew that much. Also because of the announcer, but he wasn't totally without culture. It was romantic music, the announcer had added, and he figured it was called that for a good reason, but he wasn't sure why. It wasn't hot and heavy or anything like that, it didn't have any words to make you think it was romantic. He'd sort of counted on knowing what was romantic at this stage of the game.

He burst into the house, then slowed himself as he saw no signs of her. He called her name but it only echoed. The refrigerator held a casserole and a pitcher of iced tea, but after a long day he was ready for a beer. He headed out to the garage. Sure enough, he was running low, and he made a mental note to refill the outside fridge. As he opened the screen door with a creak, he noticed that her car was parked. Well, where the hell was she, without her car? Was the woman home and just not answering his call? Why the hell would she do something like that? There was only one reason he could think of, and it was back in his bedroom.

He considered this for a minute. The way he saw things, there were two options. One, he could turn on the television and wait it out. Whoever it was, he had to come out sooner or later, and that's when the two of them would meet, face to face. And a minute later, he intended, one of them would be laid out on the floor. But, he told himself, there was the possibility that they would know he'd come home and sneak the fellow out the window. He'd never have any way of knowing that. The only thing to do to be sure was to see for himself.

He clenched his toes to keep his boots from making noise as he felt his way down the hall. He could feel the pulse racing in his neck, his chest, his wrists. The door was closed, and he hesitated for a moment, listening. There was no sound except for a faint whisper, which he soon discovered was his own breathing. He slowly grasped the handle and waited for a squeak. Nothing. He turned it at what seemed a degree at a time. Still no noise. He pushed the door open a slit, then a crack, then full force, his

eyes closed.

On the count of three, he opened them. Sure enough, there she was, in the bed. Except there was no one with her, not a sign of a man, and she was snoring softly. The covers weren't even pulled back; she'd just burrowed her way beneath their chenille bedspread. He saw dark lumps toward the end of the bed and checked them, confirming his suspicion. He took off the shoes and laid them on the floor, then tucked the spread around her feet. She hadn't even unbuttoned her blouse, and her neck was pinkening in a ring where the collar choked the skin. He moved close to her face, testing with a wave to see if she would waken, then gently undid the buttons. A sigh was his reward. The blinds whirled as he let them down and blocked out the evening's remaining light. She stirred for a second, then settled back into position. He leaned over her cool face and brushed his lips against her forehead.

Back in the hall, he checked his watch. Just enough time to hit Kroger. He was careful not to let the front door slam behind him. He hopped into the truck and within ten minutes he'd arrived at his destination; by twelve, he was back in the floral department. No one appeared from the back, so he took to checking out the selection in the glass-doored refrigerators. Carnations, daisies, ferns, and then roses. His eyes fell on pink ones first, but he thought for a moment and decided on red.

Somebody appeared at the desk without his noticing and offered assistance. The woman smiled at the single rose and suggested an array of cards. An anniversary? she wondered aloud. A birthday, perhaps? He just smiled, a boy's smile, suddenly embarrassed. He busied himself with the cards and found the plainest one of the bunch, a white one with a single rose in the corner. He noticed the woman was watching him as he struggled for words, so he distracted her. He needed some twine, he said, to attach the card to the flower. She proposed the plastic card stand, but he insisted that it wouldn't suit his purposes, so she headed into the aromatic back of the department.

He checked the pen with a hesitant letter, then wrote the message fast, as if it might escape him at a slower rate. He looked at the words and felt his heart race. It was ridiculous, really; it was like he was back in school again, asking a girl out on a date. Before he had any more time to reflect, though, the woman returned with a hole punch and some twine. She tied a neat knot through the card and onto the flower without disturbing the leaves. He reached into his wallet for cash, paid, and left, the bell tinkling again behind him.

When he got home, he watched her sleep for a few minutes. He could still smell the rose on his hands. Back in the kitchen, he checked the water in the vase and refilled it. The older flowers were beginning to die, their petals withering like a grandmother's skin. Now there were more than a few petals lying on the doily. He tried not to knock any more out as he inserted his rose, checking the card's message one last time. Satisfied, he left it standing in the middle of the bunch, just budding.

*Melissa Bostrom '96*