

The Woman Down the Hall

by Christian Bell

The woman down the hall called me, gagging and wheezing, said she'd mixed ammonia with bleach in her bathtub, said, this time, it's it. I was watching *The Terminator* on VHS—something we were supposed to do together—and bolted from my couch when I heard her. The movie kept going. Warfare in a nightclub. A lull in the action. Reese said, come with me if you want to live.

I'd been seeing her for about two months. She sucked at killing herself. Or, you could be more positive and say, she's good at the failed suicide. A dozen Tylenol PM, enough to knock her out and send her to the ER, administer ipecac and the Olympic sport of hurling. One evening I was eating popcorn and watching *The Breakfast Club* when she called, said, I'm putting my head in the oven, her voice matching the acoustics of the confined metal space, I'm doing it. But these apartments—the ovens are electric not gas. I told her that, said, it was more like sticking your head inside a hot July afternoon. Oh, shit, she said. Be careful not to burn your chin on the oven rack, I said. She hung up. Andrew was on screen, all remorseful about taping some poor kid's ass together.

I remember years ago my mother saying to me, don't get involved with the woman down the hall. She didn't even know this particular woman; it was just a general pronunciation, that somehow being female and living down the hall meant bad things. We grew up living in apartments. Paper thin walls revealing the music choices, the love lives, the anger of others. I was a teenager. I didn't get it. I asked her, aren't you also a woman down the hall? She looked at me for a second, her brown eyes framed in wrinkles, looking as mentally there as she ever was, then said, no, I'm not. She never told me about mixing ammonia and bleach. Maybe she didn't know. Maybe that was something Dad was meant to tell me.

Now here I was, trying to jimmy the lock. Frantic, shaking the cheap scratched metal handle up and down, hoping it would break off. I couldn't hear anything inside, so I decided to use my arm as battering ram to break down the door. It took three painful blows, my left arm from elbow to shoulder in stabbing pain, to force the door open.

Inside I started calling her name. Water was running in the bathroom. She's sitting on the floor, head slumped over the tub, breathing. The room smelled like ammonia. The phone was lying on its back, helpless little turtle.

I'm such a loser, she said. She tossed an empty ammonia bottle into the tub. Next to her was a Clorox bottle, label worn like a vintage iron-on. The bleach—whatever was in that bottle wasn't bleach, she said. I'm waiting to die by chemical warfare and it's just nose irritation from ammonia. She lifted her head, looked at me. Why do you stay with me?

It was then that I grabbed her arm, lifted her up, and said, let's go. My left arm was still in pain. We walked past my apartment and I could hear *The Terminator* playing inside, screaming and tire screeching and gunfire.

We got into my car and drove. She didn't say anything. We crossed the state line and the road became a small line dwarfed by country, trees. She stared straight ahead. I grabbed her wrist and felt the jagged scar she told me was years before. We drove for hours. We stopped for gas and food. Not once did she ask, where are we going. I asked her to move in with me. I didn't say, you'd no longer be the woman down the hall, or we could be stupid together, make intoxicated love and live on junk food and old movies, raise dysfunctional kids in sad paint-chipped apartments.

Still she said nothing. We kept driving, crossing through counties

and charting the country's farm land. I resolved not to stop.

If my mother were alive, she'd blame my father. I didn't know him from Adam but growing up he was always to blame, he was the source of all discomfort. I can hear her say, he's the one who switched the bleach out of that bottle, as if that were now wrong. Can you ever say anything nice about my father, I asked her once. She looked at me and shook her head.

Night comes and we're still driving and there's no one around. We did it. We escaped. Here I am with the woman down the hall. At some point she grabs my hand and says, yes, I'll move in. I can't pay you or promise you anything but I can scrub your sink and tub, wash your clothes and sheets. But let's keep going now.

I thought about my *The Terminator* VHS tape. By now it finished to an absent audience, rolled through the credits and snow and hit the clear tape and stopped and rewind itself. It's back at the beginning. It's ready to play again.

