



Dove

by Kate Klein

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Sharon looked through the window into her own kitchen. Her life was in there and all the lights were on. True, her clothes were here in the Toyota with her, stuffed into two big duffels, and her grandmother's quilt was in town on Carol's couch, which she'd been using as a bed. Her dinner she would assemble, when she was done here, from leftovers in the staff fridge at Sunflower Whole Foods, from the stale ends of Italian bread and Tofurky too old to sell. These were the things keeping her, technically, alive—clothed, sheltered, fed. But her life was there in the cabin, and in the little barn beside it. Her yarn, her clay and potting wheel, her raw silver and her metal torch. Her chickens, her sheep, her cats, her bird. Her spider plants, the leather jacket she'd gotten married in.

Charlie was out. His truck was gone but he'd left every fucking light in the cabin burning and two deep tracks in the snow. Sharon steered the Toyota into them. He would be back soon.

His boot tracks did not extend to the barn.

"Bastard," she said as chickens flocked around her ankles. "Hasn't fed you for two days." She didn't even bother to look for eggs. Hungry hens don't lay. The sheep clustered together outside the barn. He'd attempted to care for them by humping another bale of hay on top of the snow-covered mound by the fence. She knocked three old bales to the ground before spreading a fresh one low; stack them too high and the sheep, sweet creatures, climbed right up and over and out.

"Come find me next time," she said to them as they butted her with their heavy, blunt heads. Sheep are not dumb. Their smarts just run in different channels. They missed her, she could tell.

The cabin was a wreck inside. The remnants of a party—or a week of parties—clogged the kitchen table and the sink. Overflowing ash trays, dismantled, empty six packs, a month-old Mid-York Weekly open to the want ads. Stale pot smell shrouded the room. She kicked a beer can. "You can pick that up yourself," she said. She opened a window and waved in cold air. The new, efficient furnace she'd bought and hauled and made him install only by tearing out the old one so his beer froze in the basement was running and the room was hot. The cat sprang to the counter and complained, rubbing its spine insistently against her arm.

"You, too?" she said, enfolding the soft face in her hand. How long had it been since anyone touched her? And now it was

to demand attention and food. The cat complained again. "You wait," she said.

She plucked a cigarette butt and a burnt match from her spider plant on the sill, the one that spilled long as her own red hair. She touched the soil. It was dry.

"At least you still got water in here," she said, moving from one plant to the next, watering with the old Folger's can, kitchen to bedroom to den. His unemployment wouldn't last long at this rate. Or was he actually applying for jobs? She flipped the newspaper to the front page. January: it was a month old.

Today was Friday. He was out for beer and cigarettes and whatever it was he spent his weekly benefits on. Her stove, stone cold, had become a storage space for pizza boxes and half-full bags of chips. Near the back, on a burner, she found a bag of organic pretzels they'd opened together for their Labor Day cookout. She remembered bringing it home from Sunflower Whole Foods. She remembered the crinkle and whoosh of air as she had torn the sealed bag and offered him one. Now they were stale and salty. The pulp stuck in her mouth. The house had been full of life once, when they had friends together. They'd stayed married for years, somehow. Or had it always been like this, every good time just the start of a process of decay?

"Good thing we never," but she stopped the thought.

She took the month-old classified section into the bathroom and unlatched the dove's cage. The dove bobbed and cooed and fluttered out, greeting Sharon with a bump on the shoulder before flopping to the floor. She'd rescued him in the pasture last summer, a hawk escapee. He could not fly.

"Hi bird," she said.

The dove wing-hopped to the bathtub and started to strut and peck and preen in the puddles of stagnant water. The drain was clogged with thick blond hair. His cage was filthy. She balled the shit-crusting newspaper and threw it into the kitchen for Charlie to pick up, or not, later. She was aware that she would eventually get the cabin and she would be the one to clean the mess, eventually. Anything she added to it now would come back to get her. But, she thought, she could deal with anything once she had her life back. Until then, she wanted Charlie to wallow a little. Wallow knee-deep in dove shit and expired help-wanted notices.

She bleached the cage and spread the Mid-York Weekly. Some ads were circled in thick drafting pencil. For sale: '07 Chevy pick-up, like new. For sale: Arctic Cat \$2,000. Winter fun, best offer. Wanted: SWM. Caring, fun, outdoor guy for adventure-seeking woman.

"Here, baby. Work on this." She lifted the dove to his cage

and let him peck around the paper, the wire bars, her bare hand. His feathers were like silk and shone like the lapels of an old tuxedo. His round eye gleamed at her and winked, the elegant button in the silk. He trusted her, his rescuer. She often sensed he knew what she was feeling. Like sheep, doves are not dumb, just a different kind of smart, a trusting smart, which can be dumb, too, in the wrong situation.

She heaped his dish with seed and his bowl with fresh water and watched him drink. "You're still here, bird," she said. "Maybe it's not all broken yet."

She gave one final stroke to the feathered finery. His jet eye winked back. She felt shabby. She had not even taken off her coat.

Back in the kitchen the cat complained and blocked her way to the door. She kicked at it, suddenly irritated and hungry and out of stuff to give. "You wait," she said. "He knows where your damn food is. Get him off his ass."

As she closed the kitchen window a shadow crossed her mind. There was something left to do, but it was so small and high up and far away, a hawk passing overhead, but she could not pin it down. She was done doing for him for the night. She wanted to get out of his tracks before he returned. Her Toyota strained to clear the snow as she backed out of the drive.

Back at the deli, Sharon stacked her bread ends with the expired Tofurky and doused it with Victoria's special sesame dressing. They made the dressings in-house and stored them in plastic squirt bottles in the cooler, sesame in yellow mustard bottles, Green Goddess in green Gatorade bottles, spicy Thai in red ketchup bottles. Sharon ate her sandwich standing up.

"Have some soup," said Victoria. It was just the two of them working until closing time. "And sit down. I got this."

"My tab's long enough," said Sharon. A month's worth of hand-written charges scrawled on an order slip—two bucks for hummus, one for chili, five for Ezekiel bread, etc.—waited for her in the mug by the register. Everyone kept a tab but Sharon's was longest and oldest.

"I said *have*, Sharon," said Victoria. "It's a slow night. I'll just throw it away."

"You will not." But the soup smelled good.

One old man, a regular, ate vegan chili and cornbread, his usual supper, in the corner with the *New York Times*. The other customer, a crazy-haired woman in a wool jacket and flax pants, poked through the vitamin shelf. Victoria went

around the counter to help her.

Quietly, as if it would violate a health code, Sharon ladled soup from the warmer into her favorite mug, the one with the broken handle. Last week Celia, the youngest employee, had tried to wash it and it broke. Now the hot mug burned Sharon's hands but she held on. The soup was Hungarian mushroom. She savored it, but did not sit down. She disliked taking anything from Victoria, her boss. Victoria was taller, tougher and younger by ten years. She had opened the deli years before with Sharon's aunt Louise, her lover. Victoria had been just a kid out of college back then, Louise almost old enough to be her mother. Sharon had expected her to leave Louise and start her own life, but she stayed. When Louise died of breast cancer three years ago Victoria stayed, expanded the grocery line, improved the menu and offered Sharon a job when Charlie lost his. Then she offered Sharon more hours to convince her to leave Charlie.

Every day Sharon told herself to be a stoic as Victoria. Every day she willed herself to silence but every day she spilled the beans. Now she told herself: Nothing. Say as little about your life as Victoria says to you. But the warm soup was melting her.

"Where have you been?" Victoria said, after ringing up the vitamins and watching the customer exit beneath the prayer flags by the door.

"Driving."

"Oh? Where?"

"Just back to the cabin."

Victoria's eyebrows arched. Even her eyebrows were strong. "You didn't talk to him."

"Nope. Thank God. He was out." She stared into her soup. The soup stared back. "Out getting beer and cigarettes. The basics."

"How does the place look?"

"Like hell."

As an answer, Victoria dumped chick peas into the food processor and hit *grind* to make them into hummus.

"He's a 55 year old boy," Sharon said as soon as the noise died down. "What do I expect?"

"I don't know," said Victoria, as if it had been a real question. "I don't have many men in my life."

“He’s not a man,” said Sharon. “Not yet.”

“You tried.” Victoria scraped the garlicky, puce blob into a plastic container. Sharon didn’t used to be a vegetarian but now the deli was her cheapest—often only—source of food. She spent her days surrounded by vegan chili, colorless chic pea paste and gluten-free kale wraps. She missed the steaks Charlie used to grill, and still did without her around. She’d smelled them in the kitchen. She felt starved, winter-skinny, dry.

“This hurts me more than it hurts him,” she said.

“You can’t go back.” Victoria struck the side of the food processor with her rubber spatula then tossed it in the sink. It danced around the steel cube before sinking into the murky water.

“I can if I want,” Sharon said quietly. “My pots, my plants, my jewelry making crap. I made that stuff and it’s still there. My animals, my dove. I don’t miss him. I miss me.”

Again, the shadow, the task left undone, glided over her mind. It made her want to go back and check, even if he was there to tangle with.

“It’s just stuff, Sharon,” said Victoria. “Let it go. Be whole within the borders of the present.”

“What present? My car? Carol’s couch? Your leftover soup? At least I had my shit together in one place.”

“Find that place without the shit.”

Sharon snorted. “You could sell that,” she said. “On a poster in your store.”

Victoria grabbed the ringing phone. “Sunflower Whole Foods,” she said, suddenly pleasant. Then her mouth formed a grim line. She held the phone out to Sharon. “Him.”

“That you, Sharon?” said the phone.

“Charlie.” She got warm and it wasn’t the soup.

“You been here,” he said. His voice was that hawk shadow in her head.

“Well, I can’t trust you to keep it all alive.”

“Your dove’s dead, Sharon,” he said. “Your dove’s dead.”

A year later, Sharon dropped off an order of molasses cookies

at the coffee shop down the street from the deli. It was evening and a band was playing at the coffee shop, a strange rock-folk group, aging hippies. The lead singer wore a top hat and his long hair fell over his eyes. His wife, an aging blond, wore an enormous fuzzy purple hat with green tassels and played the accordion as if in a trance, in front of the drummer. Sharon stayed behind the counter for a few songs, hard-driving ballads that drown out the accordion, listening, mesmerized. The coffee shop was packed with people. She could barely see the stage so she closed her eyes.

When she opened them, Charlie was there beside her. “Sharon,” he said. His graying beard was trimmed and he had his Harley Davidson bandana around his head, his leather vest over a denim shirt. “You found your jacket,” he said. He ran a finger down the sleeve.

“It was in bad shape,” she said. It was the leather jacket she’d worn to their wedding. She’d found it crumpled in a heap in the cabin basement after Charlie finally gave the place up last spring and let her buy his share. He’d needed the money more.

The wreckage had been overwhelming, the plants dead, the shitty newspaper from the dove’s cage still balled up on the kitchen floor. Through the summer, she’d worked her way, room by room, through the mess they’d made of the place, both of them. She did not know where he was living and she did not care. His friends were not her friends anymore and her friends were glad she was off their couch.

Charlie bent to sniff the restored leather. “You still look good,” he said.

“You do too.”

“I knew you’d be here.”

It was the voice she’d heard all those months, alone in the cabin. “You know the band?”

“I do,” he said. A button on his vest winked at her in the low light like the dove’s black eye.

She shook her head, holding her cardboard box she’d carried the cookies in. “I have the sheep to feed.”

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