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The Skinny Blond

by Bonnie Sedgemore

It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been so lonely. Three years earlier I'd moved to a small mountain town in Montana in an effort to overcome my husband's death and get my butt back off the ground. Nothing was working. The dear friends I'd always been able to make had not materialized. Perhaps I was just too down.

After two years I had a garage sale and towards the end of it, way past when I expected another looker, this skinny blond appeared. She squatted down beside my low table of pink depression glass letting out an exclamation of delight like she'd been waiting to find these very dishes forever. I was already sold on her.

"Where did you get all this stuff?"

"At other garage sales, estate sales, auctions."

"We should go together. I love garage sales and thrift stores. We could have so much fun doing it together." She just seemed to assume that we were already friends.

She bought most of my depression glass and we made arrangements to spend the next Friday morning making the rounds. In the next weeks we spent a bit of time together. She did not yell, did not get angry, was easy going. I found her easy to be with. I thought maybe I had me a friend. My only complaint was she was an early riser, a really early riser like five o'clock. I was old enough to believe I had a right to sleep in as long as I wished, which was closer to ten o'clock.

She invited me over to her house for coffee. She lived across a field beside my house and then through someone's back yard which came out on her street, an easy walk. I sat at her dining room table assessing her home. She was exceptionally neat and clean, yet rather ordinary. That's a nice way of saying she had no taste. However, she served me coffee and sat down across from me to smoke a cigarette, taking no coffee for herself.

"You're not going to have coffee?" I asked, puzzled. I had never had anyone serve me coffee and not take a cup for themselves.

"I've had my fill of coffee this morning."

I let it pass and we talked comfortably for a bit until the phone rang. She was right at the table with me and not listening was impossible.

"Hi James, listen we get paid tomorrow but I'm out of Jim Beam. Could

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you stop by the store and pick me up some and I'll pay you tomorrow?"

She was happy with the answer.

I couldn't help myself. "But if you get paid tomorrow can't you wait?"

"No, heavens no."

So drink was that important to her. It worried me a bit but since I had never seen her drunk it was none of my business. Maybe it was her husband who drank. We dropped the subject but now I was wondering about my new friend.

She had bleached blond stringy hair that she wore hanging straight down all around to shoulder length and was so skinny that if she stood behind a telephone pole she could hardly be seen on either side. Her posture was usually relaxed, something I liked about her. She was pretty in a worn out way.

It was my turn and I invited her for coffee one morning. She arrived early and I met her in my robe. That's what she got for coming so early. I did have the coffee made, but she wouldn't have any, wouldn't even sit down. This attitude of being nice to me but not accepting from me was baffling. We stood around the table and talked for a few minutes but I was anxious for her to leave as I didn't know how to treat her. I couldn't figure her out. She apparently wanted to be with me and be my friend but didn't act appropriately. She smoked a cigarette and said she had to be on her way. Still we remained friendly.

One day she dropped by in her truck and asked me to go with her on a short day long trip the next day. "I have to deliver a table to friend down in the valley. Why not come with me and we'll make a day of it?"

I hesitated, but she kept talking until I agreed. She'd pick me up at the ungodly hour of five-thirty and we would be off. I drug myself out of bed the next morning and was ready when she arrived. She had special smoke tools in her car to eliminate the cigarette odor since she chain smoked and they worked beautifully. I could barely believe how well they worked.

"Several years ago this man we're going to see got a few DUI's and lost his license. I knew him casually then, but I was broke and needed a job. He asked me to be his driver and that's how I got to know him. I was really grateful. He treated me well."

She drove him over to Idaho at least once a month, waiting in the car while he did his business. She soon determined his business was drugs, but she was being paid well and by now was living with him in his house. When he said drive, she drove and kept her nose out of it. I began to feel uncomfortable about this trip.

After two hours, we arrived at a house out in some flat land a long way from anywhere. The man who came out to greet us appeared normal, even nice. He was not too tall with a paunch and a fringe of dark hair, a waddle for a walk. She and I got out of the car and she introduced me. He was not at all interested in me and quickly got into a conversation with her. The skinny blond and the man unloaded the table while I watched standing beside the truck. I was decidedly feeling out of place and wanted to stay unnoticed. Something made me nervous about this visit.

We went inside and sat at the table. The man went into the kitchen and brought out booze, holding the bottle up questioning my friend.

“Okay Henry, it’s almost noon. If you just can’t wait, pour yourself a drink.” She snuffed through her nose while looking down disgustedly. They drank. I am not a drinker and refused, taking a glass of water, I feeling more out of place than ever, the silent body sitting watching and listening. I was sure they would have preferred my not listening. The two, the blond and the man talked about the merits of a ceramic sink versus a stainless steel one.

The man said, “I can see the marks on the white but I can’t on the stainless steel. I always feel filth is left on the sides and in the connections.”

“Oh, Henry, you can get a stainless steel sink just as clean. Pour bleach on it.”

“That doesn’t get rid of the dirt. It only sterilizes it. Dirt is still there.”

“There is no way you are going to get everything as clean as you’d like. No way. You’re getting too picky.”

I looked around the place. It was not expensively decorated, but was homey with small decorations here and there and pictures on the walls. No dust anywhere. Floors so clean we could, as they say, eat off them. I thought it unusual for a man to keep his home so clean and decided he must be compulsive.

The man took a bathroom break and the skinny blond led me to a bedroom down a hall that had been converted to a food storage pantry with rows of metal industrial shelving lined ever so neatly filled with cans, bottles and bags of food, rice, sugar, corn, paper goods, everything needed to hibernate inside that house for a long period, perhaps six months without going out. I’d never seen anything like it. Each space was neatly labelled with the item’s name and the amount on hand. It must have taken a lot of work, more than I would have put in to get the room arranged and stocked so thoroughly. I asked myself why someone would go to that much trouble when stores were not too distant.

“Why does he store so much food?”

“He just does. Have you ever seen anything so neat?”

To me it was strange and I was getting a creepy feeling about this man. We returned to the table. I found it difficult to find anything to say in this environment and sat silently, waiting to return home while they chatted comfortably along. I was hoping she would want to leave soon. He was a man who was always right, who knew everything about everything and didn't mind making me feel like a fool at everything I said. He corrected me harshly with knowing glances about everything I dared say, which wasn't much. After he corrected me as if he were an authority on the chemical composition of sugar versus artificial sweetener and Stevia, I completely shut up. It was a subject I knew about, but about which I wasn't going to argue with him.

The blond asked about his coin collecting and he really got stirred up about this. I was glad she got him on another subject that didn't include me. He brought out part of his coin collection and the two soon went off to his bedroom to check out his latest purchases. I wandered into the living room. I have to admit I wanted to snoop, something I don't do. Normally other people's belongings do not interest me. I'm usually not nosey, but this man was unusual.

I was looking at a poster concerning money that was on a stand in a corner and happen to look down and to the back of it. A navy blue canvas bag lay on the floor, the bag obviously filled. I could not resist it and listening closely to be sure the two were not coming around the corner, I bent to pick it up and inspect it. I unzipped it and first saw a gun, sitting right on top and a large cache of money bound by paper bands beside it, at least ten thousand in hundreds I figured. I pawed into the bag, careful not to disturb anything which would tell him I had been in it. I found underwear, a pair of slacks and a few shirts, all methodically folded as if they had come from a cleaners every stack exact. At the bottom was dried food neatly sealed in plastic bags. I deduced that this bag was a get-a-way bag in case he needed a quick exit. I bet he had every folded piece memorized and would know later that I had been into it. My hands began to shake and my ears had all along been following their conversation from the bedroom.

They were still talking, opening and closing drawers in the other room. I returned to the table to wait. I didn't want to have this man suspect me of anything. It had been wild of me to take off with this woman I didn't know that well. Now I didn't feel so safe.

Finally they decided we should drive into town and have lunch. Off we went, I being glad to be out of that house. The man was weird and I saw my friend differently now. Her world was miles from mine. The man bought us the best, a bottle of wine for me, mixed drinks for himself and the blond. Out the double doors at the back of the restaurant was a deck with gorgeous flowers in full bloom. The green of the vegetation in pots and growing up the lattice-work with the sun

filtering through it and bright on the leaves occupied my mind for a bit. It was a beautiful place and a fine restaurant.

They couldn't just eat and leave, not these two. They talked, using suggestive motions with hands and face as if they were carrying on a secret. When we finally rose to leave, the man insisted on a kiss goodbye, a personal and deep kiss I wasn't expecting. He grabbed me and laid it on. I didn't have a choice.

We went out of the restaurant together, but he went to his truck and the blond and I went to hers. We were finally off. Not far down the road, the blond started this strange conversation.

"I hope you weren't getting interested in that man. He wouldn't be good for you at all. I shouldn't have taken you."

"No I shouldn't have come but why on earth would you think I was interested in him?"

"I could see you making eyes at him." She laughed wickedly.

I was shocked. "What are you talking about? I hardly said anything and he was repellant. He's weird. I wonder at your being involved with him. The way he lives, so absolutely clean, and that storage room. The man is sick in the head."

"Isn't that room something."

We were silent for a bit, before she started again. "He killed a man, cut him up and dumped his body parts all over the country so no one can find them. I was living with him then and it was pretty intense. He was making the dough back then, and was pretty high up in the organization. But there was another drug ring close by. The top guy in his ring wanted this man from the other side killed because he was causing too much trouble and they were talking about it when he was with him. He offered to do the job because the money was so big. They're still paying him. That's how he lives.

"Somehow he got the guy out in the woods and did him. I know nothing about that. Thank God I don't. The other guys were angry about it and finally somehow they figured he did it.

For gosh sakes she drove him. She took him to the woods to kill the guy. Probably she didn't see the killing. She wasn't showing enough drama for that, but maybe. At least he must have had a bag of tools, something to dismember the guy and she must have seen that, and he surely had blood and gore on him when he returned to the car. And the weapon. Whatever he used to kill him. I didn't believe she didn't know anything about it. She did know he killed the man in the woods which means she was there. He could have told her, but no, she drove him. I

had to get myself away from her.

She waited a bit before she continued. I was thinking now I was involved, my life complicated by this knowledge. Did I have enough to go to the police? Did I even want to go to the police? The blond was focused on the road. I believed her completely as it fit with what I'd seen of the man, a conceited tight know it all. It fit with the get-a-way bag and the room full of food, the nervous constant drinking. He was afraid for his life.

She smoked cigarette after cigarette. I looked out the side window and hugged the far side of the seat. We passed the hill on the Indian Reservation. Only twenty-two miles to go. I wanted to be away from her.

"The other gang got him finally. About a year later Henry had to go into hospital for a hernia operation. It was a small private hospital. They put him to sleep and when he woke up they'd cut off his balls. He looks pretty funny standing there with his thingy hanging down and no purses. He looks really weird."

I pictured her staring at his naked body as he came out of the bathroom, though maybe that wasn't how it happened. She pulled up in my drive and I turned and said it was late. I'd talk to her in a few days. She said, "Yeah, I'm tired, too." I got out trying to pretend normal, but I wasn't normal at all. It took me awhile to get loose of her as she still assumed we were friends, but I never went anywhere with her again and never mentioned her dear friend who received her table. She didn't like it that I wouldn't have anything to do with her, but I persisted until she gave up calling me.

Bonnie Sedgemore says that she often ignores the small niggling prompts that could save her pain, as in this story. She didn't want to judge too harshly, preferring to accept others as they are. However, nothing should go wasted in life, and so I wrote about it. That's what I do, write. She once decided her work wasn't good enough to be published. She stopped writing. A year later she found she had never stopped writing. All along, stories had formed in her mind, one after another. So she writes.

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