

The Dishes

By

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The tavern was deserted, which was perfectly fine by me. Lisa was in one of her moods again, and I needed to get away from it all. I walked to the counter and waited for the barkeep to show from wherever he might be. He came out from the restroom a few minutes later, wiping his age-worn face with a brown paper towel that he threw into an unseen garbage can behind the bar.

Well into his sixties, maybe even seventies, he still had the rugged good looks and the fire and charm he must've had at my age. Even now, he could be quite the lady killer if he wanted, but behind his hey-there-glad-to-see-ya veneer, he still silently mourned his wife Chrissie. She'd now been a resident of Stillwater Pines cemetery for the past five years.

"Hey Mike, the usual?" he asked, his gravelly voice oddly making the cheerful tone seem more sincere.

"Same flavor, but not a bottle tonight. Gimme one of those mugs."

He smiled a little. "Ah, one of *those* nights, eh?"

"Yeah. Let me have five in quarters and some ones with that." I handed him a twenty, and gave him two singles for a tip after he gave me my mug. I found a pool table in the corner and grabbed a cue stick from the rack on the wall.

The thunder of the balls rolling down to the end of the table as I put the quarters in was teasingly cathartic, and I knew I was going to be shooting good for the night. I set up one rack, broke and ran the solids first, then the stripes. I set up another, missed one shot, and ran the rest. If Lisa could get mad at me before a money game, I might be able to make something of myself.

I finished my mug after the third game and Joey responded to my wave with a fresh one.

"So what's the story?" He'd been a bartender long enough to know when someone felt like talking and when they didn't. Between the beer and the game, I felt a little better and he could see it.

"Lisa's having one of her days again."

"Oh really? What's going on? If you don't mind me asking, that is..."

"Nah, no big deal. She's just getting on to me about little things, doing the dishes, the garbage. Nag, nag, nag. Just needed to get away for a bit."

He gave me a sad but almost condescending smile. "Ah, youth. You get so fired up so

easily. I was like that too, a long time ago. Well, not *that* long, only about forty years, but it feels like an eternity some time. Hey, why doncha sit at the bar, I'll break out an ashtray, and lemme tell you a story. It's a little on the crazy side, and I know you won't believe it, but it's a good listen at least and you'll get a couple of beers on the house for your troubles. Sound good?"

I looked at the table, with the remnants of my last break scattered on the green. It could wait. I put the cue stick back on the rack and followed him to the bar.

He pulled himself a mug from the taps, and tossed a plastic ashtray on the bar in front of me. I grabbed my pack out of my pocket and set it on the bar.

"Not worried about the cops tonight?"

"Nah, no one's here, they'll skip us. Hate that damned law anyways. Almost killed this place when they started it." We each lit a cigarette and took that first, deep drag normally indicative of a long day at some hard, physical work. He took almost half his mug at a swallow, and I took a couple of good drinks from mine. We sat for a moment or two in silence while he tried (I assume) to find a good starting point. Finally he did.

"You know, Chrissie was a lot like Lisa. I see that when you guys come in here together. Same energy, same level of intensity. Had that same no-nonsense, git-er-done-now mentality. Used to bug the hell out of me.

"I was a lot like you. Stubborn, a bit too much pride, almost arrogant. Not trying to get on to you or anything, just want to let you know where this starts." I nodded to assure him no harm was done, and took a drink from my mug.

"Anyways, one night—this was when we first got married, only a couple of weeks after the honeymoon—we got into it over who was going to do the dishes. I'd had a hard day at work, and it was my turn but I didn't want to. I just wanted to sit back, have a beer or two, and watch a bit of TV before bed.

"One thing led to another, and before you know it I'm red in the face, screaming at her, she's screaming back at me, just on and on. I walked out of the house and slammed the door behind me. Didn't know where I was going, didn't care. Just needed to get away from it before I said something stupid.

"So I walked. It was a nice night, middle of August when it starts to cool down in the evenings, with about a half moon giving a decent amount of light where the street lights didn't catch. About an hour later, I was a good distance from the house, ended up by the forests out there by

Johnson road, over where the Chevron station is now.

“Now here’s where it starts to get crazy. I need a refill before I go on; you want one too?” I still had barely touched mine, while he finished his while waiting for an answer. I shook my head, and pulled out another cigarette. He poured me another one from the taps anyways, and set it down beside my current mug.

“Here, this way I might not have to get up, and if it gets warm I’ll just get you another one anyways. Draft’s cheap—that glass you’re drinking from cost more than a case worth of beer out of the keg.

“Anyways, like I said, I was out by the forests, walking along, still mad. I don’t know...”

...exactly what it was that made me look up across the road at that part of the forest right then, but something did. A sound, maybe just a weird feeling. But I looked up into the underbrush, and there was this...this *thing* there, about halfway hidden by the brush and the shadows the moon cast, and it was looking at me.

I didn’t know what to think it was at the time, hadn’t seen anything like it before. But since then it’s been all over the place. Movies, tee shirts, posters they sell in the mall. Everywhere. Only they aren’t *quite* the same as what I saw, close, but not quite. You know, like a police sketch is *close* to what the suspect looks like, but maybe the nose is a little too wide, or the eyebrows are a bit lower.

It was short, maybe would’ve been able to look over this bar, but not by too much. It didn’t look like it had any clothes on, but I wouldn’t swear to it. It was about half in the brush anyways, so I wouldn’t have seen a belt or a shirt tail or anything like that. It had a hand on a branch, and I could only see maybe three fingers at the end of an arm that was way too long, like a monkey’s arms or something. The head looked like it was too big for what I could see of its neck, like it shouldn’t have been able to hold it up, but it did. Couldn’t see a nose, and it had a thin little black line where its mouth should’ve been.

Its eyes were what got me the most I think. It had two big, black eyes, which were more oval than round. It looked almost oriental, but when I think about them, I think the eyes were really that shape, not the skin around them. But they were empty. I mean, absolutely nothing there. Not mean, not happy, not curious or afraid. It was like looking at rocks or an eight ball or something. And they were just looking at me.

Mind you, I’ve been thinking about this for some forty-odd years now. It didn’t all dawn at

me at once, it's not like I stood there thinking "wow, it only has three fingers and its eyes are oval." It stuck in my head pretty well though, and I've been rolling the memories around for a long time. I might have changed things around in that time, like the way your childhood home always seems a lot smaller than the big castle you remember growing up in, but I think I'm still pretty close to the money.

Anyways, we stood there looking at each other for a few minutes. I don't know what it was thinking, but I was too scared to move. I'd probably still be standing there if the car hadn't driven by, and scared my new "friend" deeper into the forest. Even then, I still just stood there for a second or two, trying to think of what to do next. Then I decided to do the stupidest thing I think I've ever done in my life, and I've done some pretty stupid things. I followed it.

I don't know why, but I was both scared to death and utterly fearless, if that makes any sense. I ran across the street and into the brush without thinking about it any more than if I was just going to the bank or something, but at the same time I wanted to run in the other direction. Still don't know why I went in, but I did.

You know that running in the forests around here isn't exactly the easiest thing to do, especially at night when you can't see a branch in your way or some blackberry bushes ready to trip you up. I ended up doing little more than a slow jog, and after a minute or so I realized that I didn't know where I was going—I might even have already passed the little bugger and maybe it was following me now. So I stopped and listened for a bit. Nothing at all. I looked around and couldn't see anything, but somehow I knew I couldn't just walk out of the forest now. I kept on in the direction I'd been going, at a fast walk and going as quietly as I could.

It wasn't too long before I came up to a little patch that had been logged a year or so before that, still a few stumps they hadn't cleared out but otherwise empty. I walked out from the forest to almost the middle of the clearing and looked around, couldn't see anything. I finally decided whatever that thing had been was either gone for good, or more likely just some branches that caught the light funny and when the car drove past I just looked at that spot a little differently and couldn't see it. I turned around and took a couple of steps towards the road before I saw three of the stumps that I had passed coming into the clearing stand up.

One of them was surely my new friend, but all three of them looked exactly the same so I couldn't tell which one it was. They all stood there, looking at me, with those same empty eyes reflecting the moon. They were standing almost at attention, like a squad of soldiers ready for inspection. A bit more relaxed than that, but that's close enough for government work. I don't

know how long we stood there, staring at each other. Maybe a minute, maybe an hour, probably closer to ten or fifteen minutes but I don't know. Then they started walking.

They walked with an eerie grace, like dancers almost, or cats or something. Not quite synchronized, which killed the military image they almost had, but pretty close, and rhythmic, like they were each walking to a different drum that was part of the same song. They walked towards me, and I couldn't do anything but watch them get closer and closer. They stopped a couple of feet from me, close enough to where I had to look down to see them.

I've heard a lot of stories about people getting abducted, or waking up and seeing these guys in the middle of the night, and they always talk about these things talking to them with their minds. Telepathy, they call it I think. I don't know about that, but these guys didn't say anything to me, either with their mouths or with their minds. They just stood there, like they were waiting for me to introduce myself or something.

I wanted to say something, wanted to do anything except just stand there like an idiot, but I couldn't. Couldn't move, couldn't talk, nothing. I think I must've bored them, or something, because they started walking again, and walked right past me.

I turned around and watched them walk for a few moments, and then they stopped in the middle of the clearing and turned back towards me. Then they were gone. No sounds, no bright light, no ship or anything that I could see. They just disappeared from that clearing, like someone flipped a switch or something, no fade or nothing. Just gone.

His silence stretched out until I realized that he was finished.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What happened next?"

"I went home and did the dishes. You ready for another one?"

I couldn't believe it. "What do you mean you went home to do the dishes? Why didn't you call someone, the cops or the army or something?"

"What did I have to show for it? No one would've believed it. Even if they did, what could they have done?"

"Something, anything. At least someone could've been keeping an eye out or something."

"You just don't get it, do you kid? We get so caught up in our little lives, our jobs, our hobbies, our petty he-said-she-said arguments. We're arrogant, all of us, we all think we're the end-

all-and-be-all of creation, but we're not.

"Even on this chunk of rock, do you think it's going to matter if you did the dishes or not? Do you think standing your ground on that will keep Mt. St. Helens from erupting when it decides to blow again? Do you think they're going to have a national holiday for you because you made Lisa do housework? Our little arguments about taking the garbage out or cleaning up the cat box are so much less than insignificant in the bigger picture that it's almost funny to think about them.

"I'm not saying you need to believe my story—half the time I don't even believe it myself. But let's just say I'm not making it up, and I'm not crazy. Let's say there are ET's out there. Could be hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of other civilizations out there, not just the one whose ambassadors I met that night.

"Take how petty doing the laundry is compared to just the problems of the six billion other people on this planet, and hold that in comparison with a thousand other planets. Is it worth fighting over?" I said nothing; it seemed rhetorical. "How old are you Mike, twenty-four?"

"Twenty-three."

"Twenty-three. I remember being that young. You think you're the cream of the crop. Thirty's still old and forty's ancient. You can't even imagine a world before you yet. You know how old I am, right?"

"No." I had my guesses, but figured it'd be best to keep quiet rather than guess wrong.

"Seventy-two. I've been around for more than three of you. Think about that. I'm not trying to be condescending, but think about how your experience measures to a seven year old. When you're seven, you can't imagine being twenty-three. When you're twenty-three, you can't imagine being seventy-two. Believe me, I've been all three." I took a drink from my almost-empty mug, waiting for him to get to his point.

"For forty-two of those seventy-two years, Chrissie and I were together, married for forty-one of those years. In that time we still fought—you can't completely stop being human, I don't care what happens to you—but that night, seeing those three things in that clearing put everything in a different perspective. I started to see what mattered.

"It wasn't the dishes. It wasn't that the bathroom needed to be cleaned or the bed needed to be made. It wasn't even that bills needed to get paid and we needed a roof over our heads.

"What mattered was that, in this universe that may be filled with life—hell, even just this planet if you don't want to believe me—I had a person that I loved more than anything else. And she loved me. One person out of billions. That's all that matters." I said nothing, just sat there,

smoking the last of my cigarette. The jingle of the bell on the door announced a visitor.

“Aw crap, I got a customer.” He stood up and greeted a middle aged man carrying a leather cue case. I downed the last of my beer and put a five on the bar as I walked towards the door.

“Think about what I said Mike,” he called after me from behind the bar. I turned and nodded and walked out the door.

Then I went home and did the dishes.