

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1

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Mirsky rides the elevator down the twenty three floors with six stops and God knows how many people getting in and out and he never once moves from the back of the car or looks at another soul. He stinks and he knows it. And he is aware that everyone else in the elevator knows it too, but there isn't a damn thing he can do about it, and he will never see any of them again so screw 'em all. At the basement he exits rapidly and, spotting the sign, walks straight ahead into the laundry room unbuttoning his shirt as he goes.

He opens a top loader, tosses his shirt in and reaches into his pocket pulling out three quarters—all his change. The coin slot is set to take four. "Only in New York!" he mutters spotting a bill changer on the opposite wall. Dollar in hand he stares at the OUT OF ORDER sign taped to the front.

He hears a machine on the other side of the room and runs to it. Chuckling over his brilliance, he grabs his shirt from the first washing machine and tosses it into someone else's soapy wash. Then he sits down and waits.

With time on his hands and nothing to read Mirsky does what he always does—he counts. Sixteen washing machines, three out of order, fourteen dryers, four not working, a soap and bleach vending machine with five choices. Fab is empty, so it must be the most popular. Either that or no one buys it so it's never refilled. That doesn't make sense. Mirsky walks over to the laundry-folding table, hops up, looks around the room and lies down. Let's see now — the ceiling tiles are two feet by four feet and there are nine and a half of them across for nineteen feet and six and about a third the other way for twenty-five feet, so the room is four hundred and seventy-five square feet. The ceiling is just about nine feet so that makes how many cubic feet? Wait—who am I kidding? I never could do cubic.

He leaps off the table and goes over to the set tub and turns on the water. Grabbing a bar of Ivory, he soaps his hands into a lather and, crossing his arms in front of his chest, washes both pits at the same time. Then, using the same method, he rinses himself. All the time muttering, "How can she do this to me? In front of dozens of people no less. Here I am, nice enough to drive in to the city for her grandfather's funeral yesterday, and then back again today from Connecticut for the Shiva and she does this."

When the odor first became public people blamed it on the Haitians next door. That's how they cook someone said. But as the smell became stronger they discretely searched the apartment—cabinets, cupboards and closets looking for the source. The heat was stifling and the stink unbearable, especially to Mirsky. Until he realized—the stink was him! He was the source.

The washer spins dry and Mirsky opens it and pulls his shirt out noticing that the only item left is a dress. Oh what the hell, he thinks, and tosses it into the dryer with his shirt. He sits on the orange plastic molded chair (one of nine), and watches the shirt and dress dance through the dryer window. Every time the dress flashes by he thinks of Elaine—wishing that

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1

she were in that dress being tossed around. He sniffs himself again and returns to the set tub and repeats the washing process.

"Thanks for putting my dress in the dryer," a blonde in a trench coat says.

Mirsky, dripping soapy water, turns around startled. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"Sixteen B," she says pulling a pack of Newport's from her coat pocket. "It was my apartment before my boyfriend tossed me out. I saw you walk in. I've been watching you from in there." She points to the CUSTODIAN NO ADMITTANCE door in the corner. Mirsky notices a swelling on her cheek and the tremor in her hands as she lights the cigarette.

"Isn't it a little warm for a trench coat?" he asks, noting that the trench coat isn't hiding her shapely body.

"Did you ever think of owning two shirts?" She asks. "That way you'd be able to wear one and wash one?"

Mirsky almost smiles. "I'm not having a good day."

"Take a good look," the blonde says as she stares at his hairy chest. "Neither am I."

"My wife just humiliated me in front of dozens of people and thinks it's funny." Mirsky tells her his story. He embellishes the smell parts and then he gets to Elaine. I told her something or someone smelled real ripe, and she says oh really and moves away very quickly to talk to someone else. The more I raced around trying to locate the smell, the worse it became. I caught glances my way and Elaine makes her way over and tells me that she thinks that I'm the guy that's making everyone nauseous. "Are you out of your goddamned mind?" I ask her and she tells me to follow her into the bathroom. In the small bathroom the smell is even worse and I want to gag.

The blonde listens attentively, lighting another Newport as Mirsky continues. She watches his pecs tighten and twitch as his speech quickens.

"She says that she didn't get around to doing the laundry for a week or so, and I needed a clean shirt to wear today, so she got up early this morning and took this one from the bottom of the hamper and ironed it. She never thought that I'd ever find out. All the wet towels and baby clothes lying on top made the shirt smell but the spray starch covered it up, she said. As the day wore on the smell must have worked its way out. Then, she said, she probably should have taken one from the top of the hamper and I shouldn't make a federal case out of this. Just go down to the basement laundry and wash the shirt," she said.

"Wow," The blonde says. "How embarrassing. I'm down here because that bastard boyfriend of mine, Chuck, was drinking and slapped me around. He pushed me into a wall mirror and it shattered. It cut my back and now I'm washing the blood off my dress so I can get out of here and go to work. Every time he has a few drinks he accuses me of being a tramp and playing around."

"My wife accused me of having an affair with my secretary. That's why

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1

she hasn't done my laundry. She's punishing me for something she thinks I've done."

"Have you?"

"No. But I've thought about it. Have you messed around on your boyfriend?"

"I'm a cocktail waitress. I flirt with everyone but go home to my man. He knows that I flirt. It's how we met."

"Maybe he remembers," says Mirsky. "Elaine said if she ever catches me fooling around it's all over."

"Is that so bad? Do you love her?"

"No, but I work for her father. Figure it out."

"Bummer. Chuck says that if he catches me he'll do more than just slap me around."

"Sounds charming. You're dripping blood. Is there a first aid kit around here?" Mirsky asks and then walks into the Custodian's room not waiting for her answer but fully intent on finding something to aid him in getting under her trench coat.

He returns after a few minutes with some towels and a tube of K-Y jelly. "This is the best I could do on short notice. If you like, I'll try to clean the cuts and stop the bleeding."

"My name is Eve," the blonde says, dropping her coat and standing unashamed in bra and panties. "How do you want to do this?"

"Lie on the table." Mirsky says as he walks to the set tub and wets the towels with hot water. Returning, Mirsky sees several cuts, none deep, and notices her trim legs and round ass. He also notices some dirt crusted around her ankles. Gently he spreads the towels out on her back and legs and then wipes around the cuts as gingerly as possible. Mirsky thinks that he is being a real hero — hating the sight of blood as he does.

Without flinching, Eve lies on the table while Mirsky applies the K-Y as salve. "The smell was very faint at first," Mirsky says keeping up a running chatter about his humiliation. "It got stronger and stronger and in fact, I thought the grandfather was lying around rotting somewhere."

Eve remains silent, facing the dryer, away from Mirsky. She bites her lip to keep from yelling as Mirsky's rough hands roam her back and legs. A tear rolls down her cheek. Mirsky babbles on. Eve begins to smell something — faintly at first, and then, the more Mirsky speaks, the more his stink becomes apparent and she begins to feel a bit queasy.

"I think you must have dozed off," Mirsky says, "the bleeding seems to have . . ."

The sound of the elevator door opening stops Mirsky mid-sentence. A lady in curlers lugging a plastic basket filled with clothes bursts into the laundry room at a trot and stops a step away from the folding table. She looks up and sees Mirsky and the blonde. Her eyes, not betraying her thoughts, survey the scene and decisively she turns and walks to the nearest machine and begins loading her clothes.