



Death Will Clean Your Closet

A short story

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On the Saturday morning when I finally got around to cleaning my apartment, I found a ton of mouse droppings, seven enormous water bugs, and a body. The body lay crumpled like a Raggedy Ann in the back of the walk-in closet. That closet was the jewel in my rent-controlled crown. It made me the envy of all my friends with one-year leases in the overpriced shoeboxes that had replaced most of the old-law tenements and crumbling brownstones on the Upper East Side. The white working-class neighborhood of Yorkville had fallen prey to developers who put in high-rises with Sheetrock walls as thin as a corned beef on rye in a greasy spoon.

She lay sprawled on top of a pile of black plastic garbage bags filled with old clothes that I planned to donate to the thrift shop on the corner and write off on my taxes. Some day. Probably in my next life.

The closet was deep. In the front row hung stuff I actually wore. When I'd brushed my pants and shirts aside with the mop, I'd bumped up against something weirder and more solid than the sexy nighties and assorted female garments left by my ex-wife and a bunch of girlfriends I didn't know any more. I reached for the closet light, a bare bulb on one of

those cheap little chains that tend to break off in your hand when you tug on them. This one didn't, but the bulb was dead. And so was she, according to the flashlight.

When you've spent your most sexually active years having alcoholic blackouts, it is literally possible not to recognize someone you've been intimate with. This can happen as soon as the morning after. On the other hand, I hadn't had a drink in 90 days. For three months I'd been clean and sober and celibate except for a fling with my ex-wife, which didn't count, and a one-night stand that had ended badly.

The girl in my closet had a silk tie knotted around her neck. In the dim light, her face looked blue to me. She didn't appear more than mid-20s, with spiky, short dark hair, a row of sparkly ear studs, a little silver star in one pierced nostril, and a rose tattoo on her breast just above the line of her black tank top. She wore faded jeans, cropped above the ankle, with designer holes in them. Her feet were bare. The toenails of the right foot had been painted a glittery silver. It looked as if death had intervened before she got to the left. I had never seen her before in my life.

In AA they keep telling us you can't do it alone. The "it" they mostly mean is staying sober one day at a time. But they also say to practice the principles in all your affairs. The corpse in my closet was my affair, whether I liked it or not. So I called my best friend, Jimmy.

"Bruce. Hey, dude, what's up?"

Caller ID still freaks me out. I'd gotten behind in my technology while keeping up with my drinking. Jimmy, on the other hand, who's a computer genius, is high tech all the way. In the background, I could hear the sounds of battle. I recognized the rebel yell and the hoarse bark of black powder rifles. That made it either the History Channel or Jimmy's interactive Civil War reenactment website. Probably both. Jimmy multitasks.

“I was cleaning my apartment this morning,” I began.

“See? I told you that if you got sober, miracles would happen.”

“Wait, let me tell this! I burrowed all the way to the back of my closet.”

“And did you find Narnia?” Jimmy’s girlfriend, Barbara, listens on the extension.

She’s unbearably perky in the mornings.

“Nope. I found a body. A *dead* body.”

The receiver emitted a stunned silence. Then Barbara found her tongue, which never remains lost for long.

“Who is it?”

“I have no idea.”

“You’re telling me you’ve been back in that apartment ever since you got out of detox and you never *noticed*?” Barbara screeched. “A *body*?”

“You know it takes a while after detox for all your faculties to come back,” I whined.

“Withdrawal is not a synonym for brain dead,” Barbara snapped. She’s a counselor, and she has no tolerance for alcoholic griping unless she’s paid to listen to it.

“Didn’t we look in that closet back when we cleaned out the freezer and all that?”

Jimmy asked. He’d helped me dispose of some tempting controlled substances.

“The memory is fuzzy, but I think we checked. We didn’t burrow.”

“There would have been a smell,” Jimmy pointed out.

“I did notice a faint stink,” I confessed, “but you know my bedroom window looks out on the back of that Italian seafood restaurant on Third Avenue. I didn’t think anything of it.”

“How long?” Barbara demanded. “When did you first notice the smell? How could someone have gotten in? Where did it come from? Who else has your keys? What about the fire escape? And when? And why?”

“Whoa, there, Torquemada.” Becoming a counselor had refined the inquisitorial techniques Barbara was born with. “Let me think.”

My brain didn’t want to work. I forced it.

“She couldn’t have been there that long. She’s not stiff, but she’s not decaying either.” That I would have noticed.

“She?” they both piped up. Guess which of them added, “Anyone we know?”

“No!” I said emphatically. “And yes, I’m sure.”

“You’ll have to call the police.” Jimmy always does the right thing. It comes from his 15 plus years in recovery. Integrity. It’s one of the things that always scared the pants off of me about sobriety.

“I can’t.” For once, I could identify the feeling: panic. I had not enjoyed my prior dealings with the police.

“You’ve got choices,” Barbara offered. It’s one of those 12-step slogans that seem so Mickey Mouse until you actually try to live by them.

“Yeah, well, that’s no help unless one of them is quietly closing the door and pretending I never found her.”

“One day at a time, fella.” Another slogan. “One moment at a time.” Jimmy has a soothing voice. I began to come back from where part of me hovered on the ceiling looking down and the other part clutched the phone and jibbered. “First things first.”

“What *is* first?” Barbara asked.

“How about you start by going back and taking another look at the body,” Jimmy suggested. “The police are going to ask a lot of questions.”

“Even more than me,” Barbara added cheerfully. As she’ll inform you, whether you asked or not, self-honesty is one of her character assets.

“You’ll stay on the line?”

“We’re right here.”

I put down the receiver. Jimmy never tires of telling me I need to get rid of my old black AT&T clunker. I do have a cell phone, but I don’t have enough recovery to keep it charged reliably.

I marched back to the closet where the door remained open. My clothes hung where I’d left them, pushed to either side. The lighter women’s things fluttered slightly in the breeze from the half-open window. The black garbage bags still lay piled haphazardly on the floor. The dust bunnies I hadn’t gotten to stirred gently, as if restless. The body was gone.

I stood there with my jaw at half mast. The faint strains of a Puccini aria floated in from the Italian restaurant. The morning cleanup crew and prep chefs were all opera buffs. As if inspired, a blue jay’s creaky voice broke into, “Thief! thief!” from the backyard of one of the neighboring brownstones. Somewhere in the building, a door slammed.

I marched back to the phone.

“She’s not there any more.”

“Hmmm.” Living with Barbara, Jimmy’s learned to speak a little therapist.

“Bruce,” Barbara inquired sweetly, “is it possible that what you’ve been smelling is the garbage from the Italian seafood restaurant?”

“Maybe she was playing possum,” Jimmy said. I knew for a fact that Jimmy had never *seen* a possum. He grew up in Yorkville just like me, and neither of us had ventured south of 79th Street until Jimmy’s sixteenth birthday. But he loved the Discovery Channel.

“She looked dead to me.”

Jimmy had a point, though. A live person hiding in my closet would make a lot less noise sneaking away than someone dragging a body. It still didn’t explain what she had been doing in there. Or how she got in. Or who she was.

“How sure are you that you didn’t recognize her?”

That one I could answer. “Very.”

“Have you slept with any strange women lately?” Barbara is addicted to minding everybody’s business, especially Jimmy’s and mine. “Inquiring minds want to know,” she added, reading my thoughts with ease.

“No!” I didn’t have to fake indignation. “Not since detox. Except for the two you know about.”

“Before you got sober, then. Did you give anybody a key?”

“I might have,” I admitted. I’d been drinking heavily the last month or two before I’d stopped, though I hadn’t woken up with anyone I didn’t know during that time. But I might have taken one or more to bed. Post-feminist women get up and go home in the middle of the night just like men. If that’s what’d happened, I couldn’t recall.

“Do you remember your last party?” Jimmy asked. I did recall he’d stopped by for an hour or so. Once the keg arrived, he’d taken off for an AA meeting.

“Only the first two hours, maybe.”

A lot of people, not all of whom I knew, had crammed into my apartment that night. It was a couple of days before the Christmas Eve of the final binge and blackout that’d

landed me in detox. So anybody might have known the layout. They could have stolen a key. I always lost them, so I tended to keep copies lying around.

“Bruce,” said Barbara. “Is your window open?”

“Which one?” I hadn’t given up cigarettes, but without the booze to complement them, I no longer took as much pleasure in being half asphyxiated by my own smoke.

“The one leading onto the fire escape.”

Duh. That window faced the closet door. I rushed back over there and looked down into the yard. But if she’d gotten out that way, she was long gone.

Relieved as I felt not having to call the police and deal with it, I had lost my desire to clean the closet. I shoved the mop and vacuum cleaner back in there and shut the door without looking. Then I tried to forget the whole thing.

It would have been easier if Barbara hadn’t called me at least three times a day with fresh ideas. Could the woman have been retrieving something she’d hidden in the closet? Or stealing something? Had I ever kept dope in there? Did I really think she was dead? What were my mental associations when I saw her? Could she have mummified? Did King Tut cross my mind? My landlord kept the heat way up and loved to pass along the fuel costs to the tenants. So my apartment was dry, but not that dry. Nor was Barbara’s well of questions. Was I *sure* I’d never seen this girl? In the neighborhood? At an AA meeting? By the time she finished quizzing me, I could barely remember what I’d actually seen. To the best of my recollection, the girl had looked dead. But in that case, how the hell had she gotten out of the closet?

In the meantime, I went about my business. Did enough office temp work to pay the rent. Met Jimmy twice for dinner and an AA meeting. Met my sponsor at a few more meetings. Kept meaning to raise my hand and share, but never did. Took their flak about it.

Lied about developing a relationship with my Higher Power. I barely had a relationship with myself. I wasn't used to being asked if I had prayed or meditated today. So I'd grunt and squirm and hope they'd think I meant: well, sort of.

As I walked around the neighborhood, I kept an eye out for the girl with the star in her nose. She couldn't have gotten far without shoes. Maybe she lived nearby.

Instead, I ran into a lot of people I knew. Jacky Doyle, a cop I'd been to kindergarten with. Buddy Russo, the pizza guy, who Jimmy and I had hung out with drinking Colt 45s in Carl Schurz Park over by the East River in our scruffy teens. Cindy Gomez, the first girl I'd ever almost slept with. She chickened out at the last minute. Just as well, or I wouldn't have been able to look her in the face when we collided in the freezer aisle at Gristede's. She was pushing two grubby kids who barely fit in the shopping cart and buying TV dinners. I was blamelessly selecting fish sticks and wondering if it would be any fun to go fishing off Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn without a six-pack.

Then I met up with a number of people I almost knew, like my next door neighbor, a guy I thought of as Clark Kent. Maybe it was the horn-rimmed glasses. Or that he would have been a lot less nondescript in a red cape and tights. We often found ourselves sticking our keys in the lock at the same moment. Once I ran into him as I tossed a load of household garbage in the dumpster at the construction site a few doors down the street, which you're not supposed to do. He was doing the same. We nodded and said *Hi*, the way you do. Just a couple of urban outlaws. He was into heavy metal and liked to cook with garlic, and that was all I knew about him. That's New York for you. A city of strangers. Except when it's a village where everybody you grew up with either still hangs at the bar on the corner or turns up in the same church basement saying the Serenity Prayer.

It's kind of like Avalon. Or is it Brigadoon? The old Yorkville occupies the same geographical space as the spiffy new Upper East Side, but they're two separate worlds. In my building, for example, the old ethnic families or their kids have the rent controlled apartments. Old Mrs. Mooney across the hall, whose son Kevin had been killed in Vietnam, would wave and call out, "Feet first!" every time she saw me. She meant that's how they'd have to get her out of her apartment. On the next floor up were the Nagy twins, whose family had come from Hungary in 1956. Jimmy and I had played a memorable game of strip poker with the Nagy girls when we were all 12. Ilona, the one who still lived there, was a lawyer now. Marta was a chiropractor up in Larchmont. She had a house, along with a husband and kids. But I bet she'd move back to Yorkville in a flash if her sister ever wanted to give the place up. Once an apartment got vacated, decontrolled, and renovated, it went over to the other side—the upwardly mobile young who needed roommates in order to pay the high rents.

I looked for the missing woman at meetings too. I saw plenty of girls with spiky dark hair and silver-studded noses. Many recovering women had tattoos. There was a story for every tattoo, many of which I'd already heard. If I stayed sober and kept coming back, I'd probably hear them all. I tried not to look down anybody's cleavage, since thirteenth stepping, or hitting on fellow AAs, is rightly frowned upon. But I did keep an eye out for that little rose.

On the street among the yuppies and the childhood friends, I ran into half a dozen people for whom the three months I'd spent acquiring my sobriety one painful day at a time had passed in a flash, like Rip Van Winkle's 20 years.

"Hey, man, great party!" they said.

I still couldn't figure out how the girl had gotten into the closet. If she'd been in my apartment before, the party remained the most likely occasion. So I asked.

"This may sound dumb—" or "Things got kind of wild that night—"

Whichever way I put it, I felt like a jerk. But I persevered.

"Did you happen to see a girl, not too tall, spiky hair?" My fingers sketched a rooster's comb above my head. "Pierced all along the ear?" I ran my thumb down my own left lobe. "Little silver star right here?" I tapped the side of my nose.

"Hoo hoo," the first one chortled. "Lost your Cinderella? Gotta get that glass slipper out and hit the bars, man, maybe you'll find her there."

"Punk chick, huh," said the second. "Real standout in this part of town—maybe she was reverse slumming up from Alphabet City."

"Nope," said the third, "but I met a real hottie from New Jersey, one a them H towns the other side a the bridge. Practically broke the mattress. Didn't come up for air till Christmas. Hey, that was some party. Ya gonna have another soon?"

Assholes.

Seven days later, one day at a time, another Saturday. Damned if I'd spend this one cleaning. Apart from my reluctance to go anywhere near the closet, the dust had hardly settled yet from last time. I roamed restlessly around the neighborhood. March was almost over, but it wasn't quite spring. Wind nipped at the puny trees just coming into bud along the side streets in the 80s and pounced on crumpled fast food wrappers and flapping sheets of newspaper beside the curbs. I spent more than an hour in Carl Schurz Park just leaning over the railing staring at the East River, where wicked currents eddied between Wards Island to the north and Roosevelt Island stretching down past the 59th Street Bridge.

Late in the afternoon, the wind died and the sun came out. I hadn't slept well the night before. Getting unconscious every night without passing out still presented a challenge. In AA, they say that everything you ever did drunk you have to do sober. So I did something I'd never done sober before. I stretched out on a bench and went to sleep.

I didn't really think I'd doze off. I doubt I slept for more than 20 minutes. But it was long enough for me to dream. I was walking through a thick white mist toward Avalon. Or was it Brigadoon? I knew I had to get there, and I would, if I only went far enough. But the mist went on and on. I thought about giving up. I almost did. Then Jimmy's voice said, "You didn't pass the lamp post." And I woke up.

"You didn't pass the lamp post." What the hell was that about? Where was there a lamp post? Hey, wait a minute. Avalon...Brigadoon...Narnia! You got to Narnia through the back of the wardrobe, which was just Britspeak for a closet. If you didn't pass the lamp post, it meant you hadn't gone far enough.

I leaped up off the bench fast enough to traumatize the nearest pigeons and went tear-assing through the streets toward home. My fingers shook as I stuffed my key into the lock. The hall was empty, but Clark Kent next door had the heavy metal on. I could hear the thumping of the megabass. I finally got the door open, slammed it closed behind me, and double-locked it. Then I made a beeline for the closet.

I pushed impatiently through the first row and the second. In the dark, the clothes on their hangers pressed close around me like trees in the nastier kind of fairy tale forest. Yep, there was a third row. I could make out the dresses and coats from the Forties and Fifties that my mom hadn't bothered to take with her when she'd moved out to Long Island. They smelled stuffy and old-fashioned. I guess the actual fragrance was mothballs. I even

found a few of my father's suits that my mom had never gotten around to giving away or throwing out. I thrust them all aside to left and right.

Beyond all that I finally found a door. I'd had no idea that it existed, though I'd lived in this apartment my whole life. Yorkville old-timers like me had accumulated a lifetime's worth of junk and treasures we hadn't seen in decades and never looked for, because we didn't remember we had them. But Upper East Side yuppies moved into empty spaces.

I groped for a knob or lock. When I found it, the whole thing came off in my hand. I took a startled step back and almost tripped. The screws that had held it rolled around under my feet. When I stepped on them, they fled like mice. From beyond the door, I heard the thump of heavy metal. It was a wild night in Narnia. And I smelled garlic.

An hour later, Jacky Doyle and another cop came knocking on my neighbor's door.