

New York Onions

Fiction by William Becker

I.

Jessica carries a paper bag full of onions to her apartment. She moves down the empty hallways of the building, up to the seventh floor, and to the door of room #782. She fumbles with a key pulled from her pocket, fidgets with it in her hands, and finally manages to jam it into the keyhole.

She brings the onions into her kitchen and sets them down, but before she can pull them from the bag, she has the urge to paint. Later, she hears someone talking through the door to her apartment, but ignores them.

By nightfall, she lies back in bed, listening to the pounding at her door.

II.

After a long night, she awakens.

She pulls her leather wallet from under her worn mattress, straightens some wrinkled fifty-dollar bills, then goes about her day.

She returns from the market with a second paper bag full of onions. They roll around in the bag, whispering as they go. She ignores the slip of paper taped to her door. Reaching into her pocket, she fumbles with her key. Eventually, she stumbles into her tainted apartment.

She places the bag of onions on the counter, then feels an indescribable desire to paint; luckily, her black marker is still lying beside her bed.

The voice returns a second time, just as she feels a rumble in her stomach.

III.

After a long night of drinking, she awakens.

She pulls her leather wallet from under the sheetless bed, glances into it, then notices her money has slipped out beneath the mattress. She yanks a handful of discarded twenty-dollar bills

and anxiously stuffs them into her wallet.

She returns home with a bag of onions, and, for the third time, reaches into her pocket and fumbles with the key for a moment before unlocking the door. She ignores the new notice stapled to her door.

Jessica carries the bag into her dimly lit kitchen. The flickering fluorescent lights in the room drift into the bag.

She stumbles to her bed and begins to paint with her black marker. She finishes her drawing, and soon it is time to sleep.

"Hey, stop pounding on the walls, I'm trying to sleep!" the man in the hallway shouts.

IV.

After a long night of drinking, she wakes up to the stench of markers alongside her bed.

Jessica pulls her leather wallet from under her tough, rock-hard mattress. She finds that the only money left inside of her wallet is a bunch of five-dollar bills. She tiptoes over piles of broken glass and hurries down to the market.

The flickering fluorescent lights in the room shine into the four bags, reflecting off the glass within. She shrugs, for once not wanting what is inside, then lazily slugs herself into her bedroom.

She takes the black marker from its resting place on the floor, then begins to add detail to the circles on the wall. By now, there must be hundreds.

When the hours of early morning arrive and she lies down, the voice in the hall is back.

"You are the dream," it says, "and I am the sheep in a wolf's skin. Rooms inside of rooms, but everything has a twin."

She rubs her sores, then finally sleeps.

V.

She awakens at noon, barely able to move this time.

She grabs her dirty long-sleeved shirt from the floor, some cash from under the mattress, and then heads to the market. As she walks out of the apartment, the boards covering her bedroom door seem to stare at her.

"Stop," she whispers.

She feels a warm sensation in her stomach, knowing she's lucky to have placed her mattress by the front door before they could take it.

By the time she has purchased the next bag of onions, her arms are far too tired to carry it; they ache, they burn, and the bag feels so heavy. She must drag it back to her room. As she pulls the bag down the hallway, a draft blows past her to the eviction notice on her door, sending it flying down the hallway.

"Maybe they'll forget," Jessica mutters to herself.

She manages to get the bag of onions into her kitchen, and then takes this time to rest. When she feels whole again, she pulls one of the jars from a paper bag and pours the contents into a bowl.

She draws again that night, adding smaller circles inside of the circles on the wall above her mattress. The voice returns when she is finished.

"It's not my fault," it says. "Just between us two, alright? Don't you ever leave me behind."

She smiles, blows the voice a kiss, then rubs her sores again.

VI.

Jessica crawls out from the pile of dirty blankets and blood-stained towels on top of her mattress, then scurries across the floor to the door.

She can't help but notice that her artwork has turned the entire wall of her abandoned living room black. She adds more lines to the circles on her wall, creating thousands of faces, all staring at her.

She makes it to the market a little later that day, but, like usual, she gets her bag and drags it back home. The pain in her forearms is blinding—it's worth it.

When she gets the bag full of jars into her kitchen, she sets it down next to the dozens of other bags of onions littering the room.

Her mind is eventually overrun by hunger, so she starts painting. She adds more detail to the faces, until each one is screaming in horror.

Separate from the faces, Jessica begins drawing a picture of a man dressed as a knight on one of the opposite walls.

When she lies down, the man is back again.

"They're going to take you soon," he says.

"I know," she mumbles. "He'll be back soon, don't worry, please."

VII.

She nearly trips over a discarded box of medicine the next morning. When she searches under her mattress to find money for onions, she notices she doesn't have a lot left. Hoping she can convince someone to give her a deal at the marketplace, she sets out for another bag.

Unfortunately, she finds that the seller is not in their usual place. She sniffles for a moment, realizing that there is nothing left. She stumbles back to her room, nearly in tears, and prays that he will come back soon.

Suddenly, Jessica finds determination within herself. She digs through the fifty or so bags of onions littered throughout her apartment, hoping to find at least something to get her through the night. She breaks every last one of the glass jars, but she has already used everything.

There is nothing to distract her from the painful hunger, which turns and cuts through her stomach. She winces and moans throughout the night, knowing that her body can't support her much longer.

The last thing she draws on the wall is a couple of words beneath the knight, "the one who never came back."

VIII.

Jessica doesn't wake up when she usually does.

She lies still for a few seconds, which then turn to minutes, and then to hours, and then to days. The heroin dealer at the marketplace doesn't think much of the missing girl, nor does anybody who passed her on the street. In fact, the only people who really think the change is a big deal are her neighbors.

In the time before her body goes cold and the apartment maintenance finds her, a letter is slid under the door.

Dear Jessica,

I want you to know that I'm so so sorry to hear about your father. I know it's a lot to deal with. I've lost someone too, and I know how hard it is. I also know you're dealing with a lot, but you still need to take your medicine. You know how you get when you don't. Your father wouldn't want you to have episodes. I know he left you everything he had, but I'm sending money as well. I'll try to come by in a week, but you know how work is.

Sincerely,

Mark H.

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