

S.W. Campbell

Landlady

There was a bit of a wait between meetings, so I got myself close to the next one before finding a box store parking lot to hunker down in. I parked near the back, out of the way of the crowds hustling in and out of the Canadian Tire, intermittently turning on and off the engine. Though it was summer it was chilly, but I didn't want to waste too much gas. Such things cost money. It was far cheaper to wrap myself in my coat and last as long as I could, fingering my way through my book, occasionally hitting the button on the radio to illuminate the time. I was supposed to be there at three. It would be the fourth house I would look at.

Number one had been a duplex inhabited by a pretty blonde around my own age. The place was clean and she had seemed nice enough, but throughout the interview she had given me the wary look that the lovely always give a member of my gender when met via Craigslist. I must admit that I had given her the once over, for at the age of twenty-four it's almost an unconscious reaction, and judging by how she watched me I was not as subtle as I should've been. It had been awhile. I was out of practice. To be fair, she gave me the once over as well, though I doubt for similar reasons. Hers was a more cursory inspection and assessment. Perhaps there was a part of me that wished otherwise, the part that felt atrophied by unuse, but I've long ago accepted that I'm not of the body type that turns heads. The conversation itself was pleasant enough, but it ended with the I'll think about it and let you know phrasing that told me that it was a definitive no. Such is the way of the world.

Numbers two and three weren't really worth mentioning. Number two involved a dank basement, its upstairs owner that strange breed of hairy pot bellied man that seems to proliferate in the Great White North despite a total abhorrence to the wearing of shirts regardless of the outside weather. The thought of seeing his leathery brown nipples plumped to their full potential by the cold and a belly button quite literally overflowing with lint of blue and green everyday was enough to convince me to move on. Number three was an overpriced one bedroom apartment, cheaply made, but shined to a high gloss, with every square inch of floor covered by the repetitive swirling of artificial hardwood. The tour ended in the bathroom where it was difficult not to notice a massive turd serenely sitting in the toilet, which the prospective landlord casually flushed down without missing a beat. There was a fourth house as well, though I didn't count it since I never went in. The house was a ruin that stood out starkly from the well manicured world around it, a sharp middle finger against all levels of conformity. My gut made its inclination known and I followed obediently, slowing down only enough to confirm the address.

With a day of looking under my belt I was left with just one more. One last opportunity before making the half hour drive back south to Calgary where I was living on the floor of my cousin's and his fiance's small five hundred square foot high rise apartment in downtown. A place where after two weeks even the bonds of familial ties were beginning to grow thin. Which is of course fair. I wouldn't want me living on my floor for long periods of time either. Hitting the radio button again the clock glowed 2:45. Careful to mark the stopping place in my book with a dollar bill, I started the car and headed out on my way.

The route was a maze of matching shiny vinyl houses lined up perfectly like pupils in preparatory school along streets with names like Silver Springs, Stonebridge, and Creek Gardens. The city of Airdrie was

a cookie cutter affair of suburbia. A shifting labyrinth of curving boulevards which gave out without warning, forcing numerous retreats and realignments. Not a single tree was more than twelve feet high, though they would likely all be magnificent bastards by the time the occasional child seen playing managed to scrape together their own identical dream.

The house itself was not the biggest on the block, but neither was it the smallest. It was a nice two story affair, white paint with blue trim, with no territorial fences dividing one set of grass and bushes from the other, and the garage hidden in the back along a gravelled alley. I parked across the street and walked over, the steps of the front porch creaking under my shoes, mingling with the musical tinkle of wood chimes next door. I rang the doorbell and took a step back. I'm a tall man and my coat makes me look bigger than I actually am. I smiled when the woman answered the door, a gesture she returned in kind.

“Hello,” I said, “I'm here about the room to rent.”

“Of course,” she answered, her bright blue eyes never breaking away from mine. “Right on time.”

She was probably in her mid to late thirties, though such things are always hard for me to tell. She was a handsome woman, though not beautiful. An unkind person might even call her plain. She was starting to show the signs of age, faint crows feet around the eyes and a little more fat in the paunch and along the hind end. Her straight blonde hair was cut into a bob which framed her face and added roundness to the square set of her head.

“I always like to be punctual,” I stated, letting my smile broaden in hopes of seeming to be a lighthearted fellow.

“It's appreciated, you wouldn't believe how many people show up to these things late. Please come in.”

She pulled the door all the way open and I pulled open the screen, and with that I was swept inside to a small entryway divided from the living room proper by a short half wall. I must admit that I admired her back in a way that decorum didn't allow me with her front, but I hid it well when she turned and blocked my way.

“Would you please take off your shoes?”

It was phrased as a question, but her tone gave no hints of it being a request. I dutifully leaned down and untied my laces, rolling up my jeans so I wouldn't tread upon the hem. She watched the entire process silently, her eyes never breaking away, leaving me feeling pressed down by the gaze of a power from up on high. When I rose, she took a step back in order to give me full entry, and gestured for me to sit on a cream colored couch.

“Would you like something to drink? Water? Pop? Beer?”

My senses flickered at the mention of beer, but I thought it better to put my best foot forward.

“A pop would be fine as long as it isn't diet.”

Her eyes squinted a little in a way that brought out her crows feet.

“I'm having a beer.”

The suggestion was obvious, but again the tone didn't suggest a choice in the matter.

“I'll have a beer too then.”

“Good, one always hates to drink alone.”

She walked through the dining room and out to the kitchen, all visible via open double doors. I took a moment to enjoy the view again, and then gazed about my surroundings. It was a standard living room. Couch, chairs, end tables, coffee table, a few potted plants, bookshelves built into the wall on either

side of a fireplace, and a TV in its nook in a corner. Everything was set just right, the quality all more towards the higher end. There were no signs of pop culture or personal knick knacks, except for a few photo albums tucked low on a bottom shelf next to an Atlas. The other books on the shelves were hardbacks with the colorful jackets removed, their number balanced carefully with a few decorative pieces of varying sizes and types. The photos were all landscapes or close ups of plants. The carpet was a mix of tans and browns. Matching curtains hung from stately rods, framing the windows. It was clean to the point that she was either persnickety about such things or had the money to hire someone to do it for her on a regular basis.

She returned with a gliding step, moving along while still not being in a hurry. She leaned over to hand me my beer and then took a seat on the other end of the couch, turning her whole body to face me, tucking her legs up beneath her. I could feel her watching me with a steady line as I took a drink and studied the label. It was something called Rickards White, not an instant favorite, but palatable. She waited patiently for me to get up the nerve to look back at her, and then got to business without delay.

“I think it’s good for us to get to know each other. That way we’ll see whether or not this is going to work.”

I nodded my head in agreement. The questions came one after another, a steady cadence of inquiry with the feel of a job interview. Where was I from? What was I doing in Alberta? Where did I get my education? What did I like to do? How many siblings did I have? How long was I going to be in Canada? I answered as best I could, smiling and trying to throw in the occasional joke. I felt like I should ask my own questions, but I didn’t, rendered incapable by a brash display of confidence I knew I would never be able to match. Her eyes were on me the entire time, her gaze never wavering but for the occasional shift for her to take a drink of beer. Two blue beams skewering me like an insect beneath a microscope. Studying every

nook and crevasse to ascertain exactly what type of bug I was. The house was warm, so I took off my jacket, every movement feeling jerky and unnatural. Every breath and beat of my heart was a noticeable echoing shudder across my form. I could feel every movement of my face as I answered her questions. Every slip of my tongue. Again and again I retreated from the ferocity of her gaze, falling back to the safe havens of the less intimidating comforts of the world around us and the sweet liquid release of my beer.

Then it was done. The questions stopped coming and for a moment she broke away, staring upward at the ceiling as though through it, the husk before her completely forgotten for a moment before her gaze came back down and the flow of information reversed itself. She began to tell me about the neighborhood, the town, and the area in general. She mentioned the rent. The terms. A stately queen upon her throne, surrounded by the finery she had collected as an upper mid-level executive of a company that likely made something or did something of some importance. This was her kingdom and it must be recognized that I was the one meekly asking for entrance. I tried to face up to it again. Tried to assert some kind of foothold, but fell back, first from her eyes to her mouth, then from her mouth to her beer on the coffee table, resting for another attempt.

Her words kept coming, but increasingly they drifted through without sticking, my mind completely overwhelmed with the task of controlling every little minutiae of my existence, lest any movement or gesture be judged as lacking. With a sudden horror I found myself wondering what her nipples looked like. What color were they? What shape? What size? I desperately tried to stifle the stray thought, but it roared back, doubling in strength and size. I could feel my eyes wandering toward the small globes beneath her shirt, delving through the cotton layers. It spread like wildfire. No longer just nipples and the curve of a breast, but everything. The shape of her legs. The roundness of her ass. The line of her neck. The shape of her

ears. The quick liveness of her hands as they tucked a strand of hair behind said ears. There was no safe place to look. No safe haven at all in her direction. I jerked away to the refuge of my beer. I could feel sweat glistening on my brow. The cadence of her voice changed to that of a question.

“Would you like a tour?”

I took a swig of my beer and held it in my hands. For a brief moment I thought I caught a glint of amusement in her eyes, but when I looked again they were all business.

“Of course.”

She rose and I obediently followed. My eyes darted from one place to the next. I refused to let them rest anywhere for long, fearing the danger of prolonged exposure. From the living room we went into the dining room. A heavy table surrounded by twelve sturdy chairs. A cabinet in the corner holding fine dinnerware. Still lifes of fruits and breads hung on the walls in elaborate wooden frames. Her long fingers intimately brushed against the backs of chairs as she walked past them.

“I hold a dinner party about once a month. You’d enjoy them. Lots of interesting conversation.”

The idea of dinner parties held little interest for me, but I bit my tongue. She led me into the kitchen like a balloon on a string. Its counters were a dark granite with a matching stone facade on the floor. The sink as much decoration as tool. The appliances chrome, buffed to a high shine. There were no magnets on the refrigerator. No pictures, wedding invites, or grocery lists. I drank the last of my beer and stomped the thoughts bubbling through me into the ground, crushing them beneath my heel. The illusion of the temptress before me collapsed back into the reality of a woman simply renting out a room. Silently cursing the shortcomings of my gender, I tapped the glass of the bottle on the granite of the counter.

“Where would you like me to leave the bottle?”

She broke from her rehearsed tour spiel and gestured toward where I had tapped.

“Just leave it there. Would you like another?”

I really didn't need another, but a brashness overtook me, a need to assert some kind of dominance whether it was proper or not.

“Sure.”

She smiled and opened the fridge, pulling forth two bottles, one for me and one for herself. With a casual air she popped the tops with a church key from a drawer and handed over mine. Her fingers brushed mine as she did and I could feel the damnable thoughts of the living room rising once again, but I refused to let them. I squeezed them back into the deeps, focusing all of my brain power on listening to the words of her restarted tour, concentrating on the coldness of the beer flowing down my throat.

Off the kitchen there was a bathroom, but we merely brushed over it as a necessity without notable merit. The same treatment was given to the backyard and the garage. Back to the front we went and then up the stairs. Here at last was broken the formal facade. On the walls of the upstairs hall were rows of pictures of the house's mistress. Photos with friends, formal photos at banquets, photos of relatives living and dead, and vacation photos posed in front of stunning vistas. One of these was of her in a bikini, and though nothing of great attractiveness or note, I let my eyes linger on this one longer than the others, drinking in the portions of her currently hidden away, but breaking away before I was caught staring.

We did a cursory glance through the second bathroom, this one as well in good order, though not in the picture perfect sense of the first, for even with everything in its place it still looked lived in. The light was flicked on and off in rapid succession, and then without even a backward glance she moved on down the hall to an open door.

“And of course this would be your room.”

I pulled up even and looked in, but took a slight step back when I found another person already inside.

“This is of course Jacob. Like I said earlier, he’s moving out next week.”

He was a thin wiry boy of probably around twenty, sporting thick rimmed glasses, hair over the top of his ears, and a slight breakout across one cheek. To call him a boy was unkind given that I was only four years older than him, but I felt him to be a boy in comparison nonetheless. The room was dark with curtains across the one window, and contained little more than a blanket covered mattress on the floor, a half filled duffel bag surrounded by scattered clothes, and a stack of paperback books of various genres. All together it resembled the den of some packrat, though looking back it seems somewhat of a subjective analysis coming from a man living on his cousin’s floor.

“Hello,” I said with the jaunty flare.

“Hello,” Jacob answered, his voice flat and without emotion.

I poked my head into the room, but not for long, conscious as I was that it was still his space. I also didn’t want to remain long in my possible predecessors presence. He seemed a sullen sort, and his gaze reminded me of a dog who had been disciplined for growling at another dog that had entered its space. If the mistress of the household noticed any of it she chose to ignore it, instead cheerfully continuing on toward a closed door, me following like a tethered pet. She swung the door open with an aplomb and ushered me in.

“And this of course is my bedroom.”

She said it with an air of finality that caught my notice, as though this was of course the natural place for any tour to end. It was a big airy room, brightly lit by the sun via two large windows on the end which looked out over the street. In one corner was a dresser with two photographs which I guessed were her mother and father. In another corner was an old style full length mirror on a stand. The centerpiece was the bed. An edifice with bed posts sticking up taller than my head, covered with a patterned white coverlet and offsetting throw pillows of various shades of dark green. The room was as tidy as the rest of the house, with such added small details as a bed skirt giving off a feel of class.

She fell silent for a moment, as if giving me a chance to drink it all in, and then moved over to the bed to sit down, one leg crossed over the other. It was a tall bed and her foot just barely touched the ground. She motioned for me to join her, which I did, though I felt awkward taking a seat on the bed of someone who might end up being my landlady. As soon as I was situated we began in again, starting out with repeating the terms, but then shifting onto the subject of Jacob, his time as a tenant, where he was going, and where he had been. He was apparently a college student, but beyond that I really can't say, for I was quickly again becoming distracted.

It seemed to me as she spoke that she lent in closer, her hand dropping down next to mine, her fingers so close that I could feel the crackle of energy. She was staring at me intensely again, and though I tried to surmount it, again I fell back before her. My gaze traced the line of her mouth. My lips felt dry so I licked them. I could see myself leaning closer. One smooth motion as though sliding down an inevitable hill. In a moment she'd be in my arms, her hands fumbling at my belt buckle. In the real world she said a joke, tapping my leg with her mirth, me dutifully laughing as well. I'd bend her over the bed. I'd pound her

for all I was worth, my hand tugging on her bobbed hair, her yelling for me to go deeper and harder, begging me to not stop.

The bedroom door was open. I could see Jacob glance in as he left his own room, the same look still upon his face. He only paused for a moment, long enough for our eyes to meet, and then he moved away. I heard his footsteps retreat down the stairs, the front door open and close. My free hand was fumbling with the empty beer bottle. She brushed back the same apparently untrainable lock of hair. I'd be asleep in the room next to hers. How would it happen? How would it start? She was still talking, her eyes locked on me, never moving away. Her free hand was toying with her beer bottle as well, now just as empty as my own. I could feel myself lean in closer. I could see her eyes widen. The bottle dropping to the floor as her hand struck my face. Loud cursing as she hit me again and again, demanding that I get out. She was smiling at me, her eyes staring so intently. Such beautiful blue eyes. I didn't look away this time. She smiled at me. She was saying something. Good god what was she saying?

“Anything else?”

“No, nothing else that I can think of.”

“All right. Well, let's both take a day to think about it and you can get back to me, but don't wait too long, I'm planning on having someone to fill it before Jacob leaves.”

I nodded dumbly. She rose and headed for the stairs. I followed as demurely as a puppy. She took the beer bottle from me at the bottom of the stairs and took it and hers into the kitchen. I picked up my coat from the couch, went to the front door, and started lacing up my shoes. She came back out and leaned against the wall while she waited. I could feel her eyes tracing across me. When I rose she smiled and offered her hand.

“It was very nice to meet you.”

I took it in mine. She had a good grip. It felt like it took longer than it should. I could see her on the couch, me on top of her, her hot breath in my ear, urging me on. I could feel the blood rushing to places I didn't want it to go.

“It was nice to meet you too.”

Our hands dropped and I looked dumbly at her, the fantasies boiling feverishly in the background. She watched me, waiting. I had to do something.

“Well, have a good evening.”

“You too.”

I turned and went out the door. The screen clanged closed behind me. I could feel her watching me as I went down the porch steps. Watching me as I went down her walk. Watching me until the moment my foot left her property, and then she closed the door. I got in my car and drove the half hour back to downtown Calgary. I parked my car in the underground garage and rode the elevator to up near the top of the high rise. The apartment was empty when I got there. I went in the bathroom and did what I had to do to return to some sense of normalcy, of decency. I had her phone number written on a piece of paper. Her instructions echoed through my head. It all hung right there in front of me until with a sudden jerk it was all gone. Flushed away back into the nothingness from which it came.

My cousin and his fiance came home an hour later. He started cooking dinner while she sat down with me to watch TV. It was my cousin who broached the subject. Raising his voice from the across the counter of the kitchenette.

“Get any good leads today?”

Her hand had been right next to mine. Our fingers practically touching. Her body leaning in closer towards mine as we sat upon her bed.

“No, nothing really. I’ve got some leads out towards Drumheller. I’m going to check them out tomorrow.”

My cousin nodded and went back to his cooking.