



ROBERT DETMAN

Storage Room

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That summer, the first time I see him—when I catch him—in the back storage room, on hands and knees on a small rug, bowing slightly off-square to the far wall, I quickly and quietly close the door, and go about my business.

The fact is, I have to go through the storage room in order to get to the restroom, what I consider my restroom, since I think I'm the only one who uses it. Perhaps everyone in the office knows to avoid the storage room.

I work for an architecture firm whose offices are in a renovated Romanesque church on Ann Arbor's Main Street. I am there part time, half-asleep most days. I was hired back for the summer on the basis of work I did the previous summer. Somehow, again, I believe I have fooled the management that I am a conscientious worker. I work on projects with an eclectic team of seven people in the low-ceilinged basement of the annex—a remodeled house

next-door to the church. As if excommunicated from the main building, we ally ourselves in our outcast status.

Most of the folks I work with have some connection to the University of Michigan architecture school, where I attend and where Renda is a graduate student. I had seen him around the studios at school. He is short, with dark reddish brown hair and a sparse, yet somehow voluminous, beard. For several months we work in the same room, and I never say two words to him. He seems fastidious, with weighty matters pressing on his mind. I am surprised once when his unspeaking wife, wearing a burqa, arrives with two tiny children. Even obscured by the dark covering, I notice that his wife, also young, is beautiful. I never imagined this monastic fellow had a family.

I go into my restroom to write poetry. Often, I go in there to sleep. I am so tired from the long nights with Susan, the constant battles of our relationship, that I often find it convenient to wander down there far away from the normal traffic of the office. When I get there, it's usually a relief to close my eyes, so I stretch out on the carpet and nap for fifteen minutes. I assume that no one will know that I am in there.

After, I awake with the overwhelming desire to write poetry. I always carry a pen, and I sit up, pull out

an ATM receipt and write out the first line that comes to me. I aim for the truth. Susan and our troubles are usually the subject of this doggerel, my wrestling with what we are doing to each other, and whether we are going to drive cross country for the summer. Then I splash water on my face, mess with my hair, and walk back to my desk.

I pass one of the secretaries in the hall who I believe is complicit with my duplicity, and she looks to me in a favorable way and thus does not even question what I am doing coming out of the storage room. I am a low man on any pole, and thus back in the storage room, I could be scrounging around for old drawings, files or whatever. Once, wandering the main church building after hours, I managed to slyly slip into the president's tower office. I'd often see the president wandering the office as if a designer of great importance, though most of the architecture produced by the firm is corporate at worst, and mediocre at best. I marvel at the room, and the successful image it projects, put to no good use. Still, there is the illicit thrill of going up to the tower of the Romanesque church, the big man's private aerie, and seeing half-hearted felt-tip pen scribbles on a roll of tracing paper. The other principal who is rarely around, once stumbled disheveled past me on the day of my interview the summer before, an

unexpectedly young looking architect—and flagrant alcoholic—who drives a Jaguar.

Of all the people in our basement office, Renda is the one I know least about, and thus the most mysterious. One weekday our team pulls an all-nighter to finish the design presentation for a nursing home project deadline, though as two o'clock in the morning rolls around, useless from working all night, we are punch-drunk, bouncing off the walls, telling stories and joking around with each other. It was the first time I saw Renda crack a smile.

Two years later, in my Milwaukee street apartment in Chicago, I receive an issue of the architecture school alumni paper. I see Renda's picture, trying to recall why he looks so familiar. At this time, the war in Yugoslavia is raging out of control. Muslims are being forced out of their settlements, and in many instances, killed in widespread ethnic cleansing. There is a burgeoning orphan and refugee population. Apparently Renda, in the desire to honor his heritage, wanted to go to Kosovo and adopt a Muslim child. The story was that in his altruistic journey, a bomb had been dropped directly on the camp he was visiting. He was killed instantly, the story said, though I always wondered how they could know any of this with certainty.