

Boxed in Love, Kimberley Lynne

Frank soldiers up the Hamlet Avenue hill; his shoulders stoop and legs shake through a low-lying cloud. A train whistles. His slippers slip on wet leaves; the ground is uneven. Dogs wake and bark; cars careen through the skinny streets, spraying pebbles. Frank's breath ruffles his moustache; he inhales deeply so oxygen will push away the argument rolling around his muddied head, but it doesn't work. His thickened blood is toxic and boiling. He had bolted from the kitchen. An seething ocean tipped in his head.

"You shook a screw loose from the back door when you slammed it!" his wife Hannah called after him, her pitch rising an octave. "Do you hear?"

People in Bethany Beach hear you, he thought as he compulsively scratched the peeling rash on his arm. The itch felt good.

"A screw loose!"

Did he imagine a giggle under her annoyance? Was she secretly gleeful when she yelled? In the upstairs bathroom, that morning, he had found a *Newsweek* folded over to a report on a psychological study that tracked female immune systems. The reporter claimed that wives become healthier when they piss off their husbands. Hannah had marked the page with several exclamation marks in red ink.

"Come back! There's water in our basement!" she screeched. There was no joke under that demand.

Drips make me feel at home, he thought, as he remembered the buckets in his parents' basement. They had skirmished about leaks, mostly to inspire each other to do something about them. Their fights had rolled like polka dances, violent but boxed inside love.

Frank had to leave the house. There was nowhere to hide when he and Hannah clashed.

She followed him through the rooms and up the stairs, snapping at his heels like a sheepdog. He had never thought of his wife in a canine way, but today her nose seemed elongated, her eyes puppy brown, and her hair glossy. But, Hannah's mind is a girl's mind; she questions. She doesn't understand that when a pipe leaks, the solution is to turn off that pipe, not to call the plumber.

Determined to walk off his frustration, he continues his march up the Hamlet hill. At the top, he abruptly turns right on Hemlock Avenue, wondering about the robin's egg blue, clapboard bungalow where Ma had once lived. He stops and closes his eyes.

Years before Hannah, in the week when he had bought his house on Beechland Avenue, Frank had drawn a careful map to his new home for Ma, because she wasn't very good at directions. She drove then because Pop had lost his right leg below the knee, and she wouldn't let him use that cane to depress the brake.

Two days after his property closing, Ma had quivered on Frank's back steps with empty bags and a broom. "I'm going to drive up Hemlock and see if I can find where I was a girl," she had whispered, enjoying the reveal that scared Frank. "I think it's the third one." She had forgotten that first home until then; she had only been six or seven before they had moved north.

He wished she remembered history better. Even then, she was losing fragments of the order of her life, but she always saw reality a little differently. Crows cawed. Frank imagined young Ma lying in her girlhood bed, clutching the sheets that she had lined with aluminum foil to protect her heart from radio waves. As a child, she was convinced that her heart would burst if she left the protection of a building, but she probably was

inventing excuses to avoid the hike to St. Dominic's School. Toward the end of her life, she wouldn't leave her condo on bright days, because the sun activated a fuse in her head. She was either light sensitive or a prophet, because she died of an aneurysm.

Thick clouds had hung on the horizon like cotton batting that day of Ma's reveal; they made Frank thirsty. "Your old home is that close?" His voice had betrayed him and cracked. He had twisted his moustache so tightly that chip crumbs shook out.

It was too late to sell. Although he hated to pay rent, the life-long commitment of purchasing property in his hometown freaked him out. He stayed in Baltimore by default; his people lived here. He had bought in Hamilton, because it was a safe distance from his parents' house, and he could walk to a dozen bars and the Harvest Fare Supermarket. He didn't expect to be able to walk to his genetic source. Somehow, completely by accident, he had managed to move into the part of the world where his mother had emerged. Her blood drew him to their heritage painted across the sidewalks and the oak leaves.

"Third bungalow, this side," Ma had said. She had held the end of the broom over her heart like a shield and teetered away.

Frank opens his eyes. Fresh from the Hannah Plumbing Fight, he stands before Ma's childhood home on Hemlock Avenue. Plastic flowers fill the porch and litter its garden. A Blessed Virgin Mary on the half shell and a Little Dutch Boy statue guard the steps. Through the glass panel in the front door, Frank sees the tiny living room stuffed with bulging bags and stacks of magazines and newspapers. The shape of an armchair and a couch crouch under the hoarders' mounds of stained blankets and rumpled laundry. Figurines, tins, and candles crowd the shelves. Thin paths weave between layers of loose

paper coating the carpet. A tower of empty pizza boxes teeters next to the TV. A matching tower of milk crates flanks the narrow steps. A flock of silverfish saunters out.

According to Ma, the house looked very much the same as it did in the fifties, and that gave her a sense of continuity. Frank's hoarder grandparents had a history of life on that Hamilton hill. Ma had learned to walk and talk in that house. In that house, she had first wrestled with the concept that words are paired with objects. In that house, she had learned consequences and eaten homemade cookies. She had played under that willow tree when she was strong enough to face the backyard or wasn't strong enough to face her parents. (She didn't like the word *parent*.) His grandparents had divorced when she was a teenager, and Frank wondered if that ugliness took seed during those early years. They had slept together in that house, brushed their teeth, and taken baths. That energy was soaked into the walls, behind all the stuffed bears and vases, staining the plaster, their voices trapped forever, muffled ghosts pinned under the paint. The wall framing knew his grandmother's cries of passion and his mother's tantrums. Skin cells sprinkled across the caulking and the floorboards. Wood is porous.

Frank's stomach aches from the Hannah Plumbing Fight. He drinks vodka from his water bottle and fights the urge to knock on the hoarders' door. The buried room looks like his boyhood home, safe, and he suspects that the owners have few guests. He wonders if they have pets or kids; he hates cats as much as he hates the word *human*.

He runs a speech through his head, explaining to the current hoarders why he wants to see inside. "Ma was sad here. She curled in a basket in the kitchen for a week once. Of course, she was much smaller then. She got much smaller again before she died, and, well, I think she would've liked your candle collection."

Rain mists. Frank thinks that from the top of the Hemlock hill, he can see his life from a benign distance. He sniffs and wonders if Hannah can live without the basement bathroom. She never uses it. Maybe she wants everything to work, and that thought scares him the most. She was born in the land of plastic-coated sofas and weekly dustings. He shudders. A car door shuts behind him. A ruffled curtain flutters in the side window. Frank hears sobbing under the flow of a shower. Several crows suddenly fly out of the willow tree.

Go home, he thinks. Go home and kiss Hannah before she goes to work mad, and it gets worse and coats the rugs with sticky resentment. Then she'll never make you Sunday roast again or wiggle under you or say that you're her hero after you toss a spider out the door. He likes it when she curls against him; she lowers his blood pressure in that calm, and he can tell her most things. He tries to tell her the truth as he knows it, but he isn't too sure that he knows any truth at all. He feels awfully unworthy of Hannah most days in this first year of their marriage. He knows she doesn't feel that, but it doesn't help. He still sometimes feels like her pet and a not very well trained one at that.

Frank's bowels shift. Ironically, he has to return to the upstairs bathroom; it was eventual. He pivots and walks back to Hamlet, trying to figure out how to fix the basement pipe without calling the plumber. His mother thought a plumber was a terrible waste of good money. He tries to remember the last time he used his unbalanced-mother excuse for seemingly irrational behavior.

She lined my pillowcases with aluminum foil, he reminds himself as he slides down the hill, but she was only worried about the fuse in my head.