



The One-Legged Tenant

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Art students Suzie Soo and Polly Nisian lived in a Dutch college town near the German border on a pleasant street with shade trees and a small playground at one end of the block where nannies watched the children play and, at the other, a cafe with pink, slatted folding chairs and plants in macramé hangers. And here they sat in whatever sun was available, proud to have found their apartment with no help from anyone, not even their parents.

They ate together every night in their tiny kitchen, sometimes arranging their food in configurations that matched constellations they'd identified in the night sky. The wine was from the lower

shelves in the supermarket, which they drank from crystal glasses found in a cardboard box in a neighbor's trash.

They only heard the first loud thud in November. And then another. Traced it to the middle of a wall where they noticed a wallpapered-over door.

Knocking timidly, they heard something strange like a sack full of meat byproducts being dragged across the floor.

The door opened and there lay a man with a forlorn gaze in a pretzeled configuration that reminded them of Andrew Wyeth's painting "Christina's World" but then in a room the size of a closet.

There they stood, two hearts balanced between curiosity and dread, surprised to see someone living in a room that, a day earlier, they did not know existed.

He wasn't gruesome or disagreeable or anything like that – except that one leg was no more than a pant leg with some air trapped inside. But they *did* squeeze one another's hands for a few seconds to make sure the other was still there.

"I'm nobody, just ignore me," he insisted, kind of apologizing for how his one-leggedness seemed to make others uncomfortable. It had been easy to ignore him since he had learned to

be absent even when he was present. It is a trick, although a sad one.

He'd had a girlfriend; she neglected him, sometimes not feeding him for days. He described his wealthy suburban parents as self-involved overachievers who'd dumped him here, which he pegged as their idea of damage control. They often went on holiday without even informing him. Did knowing all this make him less *other*? Maybe.

"They pay the rent, give me a stipend, hoping I'll just fade away." Polly and Suzie listened. A lot.

"But you with your ..." Polly wondered.

“Disability?”

“... Your one leg. Why’d they dump you on the *second* floor?”

“Tough love? Revenge? Cheap? You’ll have to ask *them*.”

He spoke parsimoniously, each word emerging awkwardly like geometric shapes pressed through the wrong holes, accented by grunts and twitchy grimaces that gradually softened into something like a smile that seemed to say “whatever”.

“Ooh, I’d like to meet them and bite their heads off ...”

He responded with a silent shrug, which they interpreted as “it is what it is”.

A few days later, they found his prosthetic limb gleaming, left to dry, leaning against the bathtub. With wine glasses in hand, gazing at a contraption they’d only ever seen once before – in an orthopédie shop window during a class trip to Paris – Suzie and Polly, on a dare – no ill will intended – grabbed the leg and strolled to De Uitvreter [The Freeloader]. Here they poured glasses of wine into the bowled receptacle where his stump was usually secured. They drank from it in a most intriguing way. Provocative but not out of character for two art students who

were studying the avant garde and together reading Nescio who writes about how ideals conflict with society's pressures.

As they were about to return home, a man wearing a pointy, red gnome hat approached.

"Isn't that Jasper's leg?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

They made a quicksilver exit, pushing, stumbling over each other on the way out, right at the very moment the gnome tipped his head back for an enthusiastic quaff of beer.

But as they approached their apartment, they spotted a hulk lying on the scruffy lawn. The man – was this Jasper, then? – lay passed out after having no doubt negotiated two flights of stairs by himself, leaving behind a slithering, reptilian path in the grass at the crossroads of exhaustion and exasperation.

They helped him up. Dead weight is heavier. Dazed and jabbering, he apologized profusely as they struggled to reattach him to his prosthesis and assist him back to his wallpapered-over door in a stumbling manner that would have seemed comical had it not been such an uneasy and gloomy occasion.

“You OK?”

“Tired as Sisyphus.” They later googled *Sisyphus*.

“Are you OK?” A slightly judgemental tone in Polly’s voice. Maybe he was milking the moment.

“Had a date, went for my leg and it’s gone. Spent forever looking for it. Lost my phone. Decided to go to the Florian anyway. Just down the street. And then I passed out.”

There was a silence loud and epic that echoed the guilt and shame Polly and Suzie both felt.

“Jasper...”

As Polly uttered his name, something came over him as if she had uttered “alakazam” to open some secret part of himself. His face changed shape like someone squeezing a mop. Tears welled up, spilling across his cheeks. They didn’t dare abandon the sobbing one-legged Jasper.

“Jasper, the cafe probably wouldn’t’ve let you in anyway with those muddy pants.” Polly laughed because it was supposed to be funny; Polly was often funny and knew that funny could break even the gloomiest ice.

“I try to be good. But constant pain; pills don’t help. Ida tried to push me down the stairs because I smoke ... and howl at the moon. My parents are

worthless; bring bags of shampoo, food, and shit and then stare at me for 20 minutes in the kitchen and then they're gone."

"It's like Dostoyevski," Suzie observed.

A few days later they found him in the kitchen making tea in a most unusual way. He'd stretched the panties Polly had hung from the shower curtain rod across the teacup and then poured looseleaf tea over the makeshift strainer. A sickly smile signaling: "two can play this game."

They also caught him eating (maybe their) ramen noodles using *their* dishes and silverware. They began noticing teethmarks in their cheese, bananas,

chocolate. Strips of masking tape with their names in marker on the containers failed to deter him. He was even seen wearing Polly's undies on the outside of his trousers. Or were they imagining things? The variance between what he meant and what they saw? He seemed to delight in his pilferings, in the way he could remold their faces with befuddlement.

One night they heard commotion in the kitchen. A low light revealed Jasper pulling his prosthetic leg out of the oven, an unrecognizable, melted, useless clump. There he stood, leaning against the counter, just staring at it. Had he, while drying the leg, simply forgotten to remove it in time or was it his "failosophical" conversion of spite

into vengeance that would alas have more daily impact on him than on his 2 housemates?

“My parents’ll kill me. Not as a favor to me, mind you, but out of indignity. Can someone be born free of all purpose?” There is a bitter inquisitorial tone that when applied to life never ends well for the inquisitor.

“My parent’s’ll be out 4000. They’ll get me another leg, give me their best worthless-fuck silent treatment for the next 6 months.”

Jasper was not a big man, skinny actually, and their idea quickly morphed into action: “We’re taking you to the park tomorrow.”

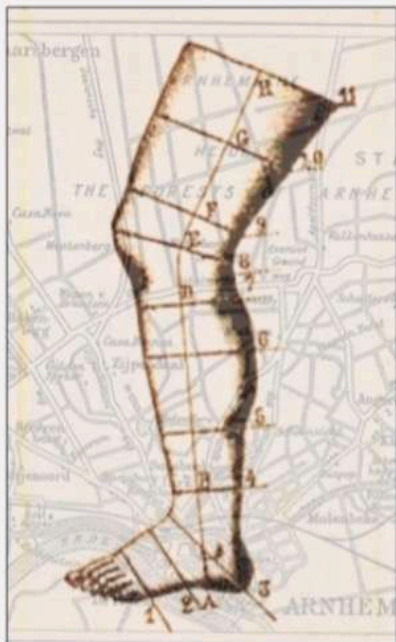
They were wide-eyed, proud of their sudden burst of generosity and genius. He had his doubts.

But this they did, using physics and smarts. Propped up on the back of the sofa, he lunged for their shoulders, wrapping his arms loosely around their necks. This is how the three of them went about town, to the park, outdoor concerts, art museums, the banks of the Rhine to watch ships drift past, watch kids ride ponies, the skate park, the outdoor market to shop for food, for facial tissues because, he cried for hours – forever – as they lugged him about hanging from their shoulders for some weeks in the fall.

They only later realized that every time they called his name – “Jasper” – the tears would well up and eventually, gelatinously begin flowing down his flushed cheeks. The emotions confused thought. That’s true not just for him.

Jasper became addicted to their attentions and began wearing attractive shirts, colognes worn by people like George Clooney or James Bond. He attempted compliments he’d heard others use on TV. He wanted to use words like “friends” or “affection” or “BFF.” But never found the right moment.

And then the two of them disappeared into some memories he held onto for many months ... years.



Wreck This Mess