

The Sign

by Charlene L. Edge

She noticed something tucked in the matted grass growing between the flooded street and the sidewalk sparkling. She was only a few feet away from it. On the other side of her were the steps of the brick apartment building where she hoped to rent a place. But she had to stop and find whatever had that glimmer. Her raincoat sagged with rain, feeling heavy across her shoulders and arms, but she did not mind. And the landlord could wait a minute.

Despite the thunderclouds and the car that splashed her as it rushed by, she swiped her fingers through the grass and scooped it up—a faceted glass doorknob. Not cracked, not even chipped. But its metal attachment piece was gone, leaving the clear glass knob without a way to be of use, like a light bulb missing its screw-in socket piece. What was this doing outside? How had it gotten lost? Had an angry girlfriend thrown it through the front apartment’s window? Had it jiggled loose and fallen out as careless movers transported a broken door?

She held it. It twinkled in the palm of her hand, along with glass-like raindrops. It felt heavy as an apple and smooth as an apple’s skin. The underside was rough, though, where once it had bejeweled the metal fitting. She gripped it gently, feeling its solidity in her hand, the curved design fitting perfectly in her fist. Then, mingled with rain, her tears began again. She wiped them away, slipped the treasure in her raincoat pocket, and climbed the steps, noticing that the lawn was choked with dandelions. The parking lot was loose gravel spread over dirt. Weeds lay flattened from car tires. A truck parked under the large oak had a rusted tailgate.

She opened the building’s door and the landlord, chatting with a resident, turned to her. After introductions, he started up a flight of stairs in the hallway. The carpet on each step was worn in the middle.

“Come on this way,” he said, climbing ahead of her. “Too bad about the rainstorm. Have a hard time getting here?”

“Oh, I don’t live far. Just saw the rental sign in the yard

and called you,” she said, taking off her raincoat, holding the side with the loaded pocket towards her body. “Really need a place this week. My boyfriend just broke up with me.”

“I see. Too bad, Miss.”

The Morningside Apartment building had been built in the 1920s in the historic part of town, where houses displayed signs that read, “Historic Preservation Society.” This building had no such designation. It had two floors, sixteen small apartments, one junky laundry room. No elevator.

“This here is the one that’s empty,” the landlord said. His breath smelled like onions. “Just a second.” He fiddled with the doorknob made of imitation brass and then stuck a key in the deadbolt slot right above it. The key turned, and the door flung open.

Within ten minutes she said she’d take it. One dingy bedroom. The kitchen and living space was one room. The bathtub was in a “closet;” the sink and toilet in another. She made mental notes of the length of walls, the crooked air conditioning unit, the cobwebbed windows, and the glass door knobs on all the doors.

“I can go home right now, write a deposit check, bring it to your office downtown. In half an hour,” she said.

“Deal.”

They shook hands in agreement. Then she followed the landlord down the narrow stairs and outside where they parted ways in the rain. He got in the truck. She walked a few blocks to her place in another second-story apartment where she saw her recently-become-former-boyfriend in a chair on the screened-in porch, staring at nothing.

“What happened?” he called, setting his beer bottle on the floor. “Did you like it? He’s such a slumlord. Everyone knows that.”

Inside by her desk, she pulled the faceted doorknob from her raincoat pocket and set it like a crown atop her notes and papers.

“Yeah, well, I’m moving into a one-bedroom,” she called back to him. “I’ve had a sign. It’s clear.”

Eyeballing the doorknob, she wrote the check and drove downtown. 🌧️

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