FLASH FICTION

Buzz

by Davide Mana



"Handle with care" by Patricia Falkenburg

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It was Buzz. That was the first thing he noticed. The dog was not barking.

Paul stopped and listened.

Every evening as Paul came back home from work, at the sound of the elevator coming to the floor, the beagle would start barking and scratching at the apartment's door. But not today.

Paul tarried for two heartbeats, and then started slowly down the corridor.

Just two days ago Buzz had almost tripped him as he walked into the apartment. "Yes, yes, Buzz, good boy… just gimme a minute and we'll go for a walk, OK?"

Linda had given him a peck on the cheek, and asked how his day had been. Buzz had yelped and cavorted on the floor. That was the routine, had been all his life.

Pat the dog, get a beer, chat with his wife, then out to walk the dog before dinner.

The door to their apartment was ajar.

Again Paul listened, a cold pressure weighing on his sternum. He stretched his hand, placed the tip of his fingers on the wood of the door, and pushed.

In the warm light of the late spring evening, his apartment was empty. His head pounding, Paul stepped in.

Empty: no carpet in the hall, no side table by the door to hold the ashtray in which he would drop his house keys. All that was left of the tall mirror was a pale rectangle on the wallpaper.

"Linda?" he called.

He held his breath. What if they were still here?

But who?

In the living room, the sofa had left four dents in the blue carpeting, and the place the coffee table had occupied was somehow brighter, and fluffier than the surrounding floor. The TV was gone. The racks with the Bluerays, and the stereo they were no longer using now that everything was streamed anyway. Gone. More pale shadows marked the walls where the paintings used to hang. On the ceiling, the light-bulbs sockets were empty, the designer cover removed, the light-bulbs too.

He squinted, the sun in his face through the windows. No curtains. He walked to the panes. The glass was cold under his fingers. No potted plants on the balcony outside, just circular marks on the tiles of the floor.

"Linda?!"

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The kitchen echoed like a cavern. The cupboard's doors hung open, revealing empty shelves. Everything was white and clean and empty. There was a dark stain where the coffee maker used to sit. No magnets on the fridge, no sticky notes. Buzz's bowl was laying on the floor, turned upside down.

A pipe under the sink groaned loudly, like a hidden monster. Paul jumped.

He realized he was still carrying his bag. He placed it on the marble top of the kitchen counter. In a corner, a red rubber ball, Buzz' toy, was all that remained of his dog's special place. Something automatic went on in his brain and he opened the refrigerator.

Come home from work. Open the fridge. Get a beer. It had always been like that.

Empty. In the stark white light, a coffee cup with a broken handle, filled with baking soda, was all that was left. For the smell, Linda used to say.

He walked like a man in a dream to the bedroom. He passed the bathroom. Empty. The shower curtain was gone. The cabinet over the sink had been cleaned of all the bottles and jars, and the aspirins and the toothpaste. His razors, his aftershave. Gone.

In the bedroom, in a corner, where the nightstand used to be, was a cardboard Amazon box. The landline telephone sat on it, and under the telephone, a sheet of paper, folded in three. Everything else, the bed and the wardrobe and the dresser with all of Linda's bottles and jars and the Hollywood-style mirror with the lightbulbs was gone.

He would have to talk to the neighbors. Somebody must have seen something.

Call the police, too.

Paul squatted down, lifted the telephone, and picked up the paper.

> I have to go.
>
> Please do not waste your time looking for me.
>
> You would not find me, and I never loved you anyway.

It was not signed. There was no need to.

He recognized Linda's hand. Neat, clear, the letters a little slanted on the side.

He felt dizzy. There was something boiling in his chest. If it was anger, or despair, or something else altogether, he could not say. He read the note again, and again, adding more creases to the paper.

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I never loved you anyway.

Then he looked down. He placed the phone on the floor, and opened the box. Curled up inside, Buzz could not yelp or cavort for his master anymore.

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