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It's weird how you can live in a place for awhile and come back even after just a few months and the place isn't yours anymore. It's like it moved on or something. It got over you.

I lived in this apartment for six months. I even wrote a book between my room and the concrete landing outside the sliding glass door. It's been six months since I moved out, and although my furniture is still here, the place is not mine. The familiar smell of old Pez has been replaced by cat hair and feces – not unlike my new townhouse up north – but the stench of this apartment dwarfs the competition.

It appears the place is being subleased by two cats, one orange and one white with black spots, as those are the only inhabitants that greet me when I open the unlocked door. They get up from the mattress in the living room (the room the front door opens into) and jump to higher positions to get a better look at the new arrival.

The cats are rather messy. Aside from the floor mattress being unmade, all the furniture in the apartment is covered in two to three inches of worthless clutter. Mail, pictures, birthday cards, all bearing the name Shane Lieborwitz adorn the dressers and mirrors. The smell of the house is almost overpowering, but I fight my way to my room at the end of the hallway.

Moving the baby/cat gate out of the way, I open the door to my room. The smell of fresh, moist air greets me, as well as the sound of light rain splashing outside the window. Six months is a long time for a window to be open, but I'm grateful it has kept my room ventilated and spared from the putridity of the rest of the apartment. In front of the window is my humble bed – an uncovered box-spring and mattress. To the left, a modest desk made of plywood and cinderblocks. An old TV sits in the corner. It's not mine – my former roommate borrowed it from some girl back when we all lived down here, back when we all talked to each other in civil, friendly tones. I was asked to bring the TV back with me. I hear the girl wants it back.

The guitar is gone. That, too, was borrowed by Keith from some girl, except it was really the girl's boyfriend's guitar, and she didn't tell him she leant it to Keith. Typical, but I won't get in to it.

Anyway, I have no idea where this girl lives and Keith is in California, and with the lease up in a few days *someone* had to take the guitar. So essentially I'm upset because someone stole it before I could. I don't play guitar, but I've been meaning to pick it up, and I figured the first step was getting a guitar.

Mail. I wonder where he put it. I didn't leave a forwarding address, and half a year is a long time for mail to accumulate. I dig through the clutter on the large dresser in the dining room (the wide part of the hallway where we used to have a table). Just a bunch of old papers and "*I love you*" cards from some girl who's name I don't bother to commit to memory, thanking him for the happiest six months of her life. Strange how so many things happen in six month intervals. I have a six month anniversary of my own coming up this Tuesday. She was the reason I left.

I find a note from the neighbor, Audrey, saying she hoped Shane enjoyed his trip and that she'd feed the cats, and when she'd be moving into her new place. She never left notes like that for us.

I search the rooms to gather my stuff together, opening windows as I go. I leave the kitchen window shut since it doesn't have a screen on it, and as much as I hate the cats for

turning my apartment into a litter box, I'm sure their owner would not be appreciative if I let them leave.

Walking into what used to be George's room, I see several moving boxes holding more random items. Was cat-man moving out or in? On the floor I see two issues of playboy that I assume belong to K. He'd asked me to bring back a lamp of his, and someday if he came across country to northern Virginia, he'd pick it up. I know he'd probably want me to bring back his Playboy's, too (he used to treat them with the same reverence as one would give a favorite classical novel), but the idea doesn't interest me, not the least of reasons being that it would upset my girlfriend. I see that a box next to the magazines has about twenty or so more issues. I know Keith never had that many, so I check the date on the top issue. It's a year and a half old, long before Keith started his subscription. I wonder if the love of cat-man's life knows about his stash of soft porn. But that's something else I don't want to get in to.

I walk toward the door, noticing that my shoes are slipping a bit on the ground. I check my feet and find that a large mess of brown goo has attached itself to the bottom of my right shoe. I've found a contributor to the stench. Disgusted, I hobble over to the sliding glass door and let myself out. I walk past two small bushes that hadn't been there before, then started kicking the grass, trying to knock all the cat excrement off my shoe. Several minutes later, satisfied that I have removed all that was possible, I take a deep breath and let myself back in. I walk back to George's room to see just how much damage the cats have done.

On the floor, by the window, I see the rest of what was on my shoe lying on a randomly placed towel on the floor. The present from the felines had apparently been in the folds, and when I inadvertently stepped on it earlier when exploring the room, its contents oozed out like a cream-filled donut being squeezed. There are several brown, single footsteps walking away from the mess. I feel a tickle in my throat, and for a second I think about running to the bathroom. I manage to compose myself.

I hear the front door open. It's now time to meet the man who introduced the new odor to my apartment. I hope he isn't carrying anything sharp and won't mistake me for a trespasser.

"Shane?" It's a girl's voice. I saw a note in the kitchen from a girl named Sarah asking him to put her blankets and pillow in a bag and that she'd come by to pick them up. This might be her, or perhaps some other local nymph of his that comes over all the time because his girlfriend lives somewhere else. I assumed his girlfriend lived far away. I'm not sure why.

I walk back into the hallway. It's our neighbors. Audrey, Sarah, and some other girl. I knew when I saw the note from Audrey that it was our neighbor, but the name Sarah is common enough for me not to think it was the Sarah next door.

The third girl was unfamiliar. There were three of them living next door when I left – Sarah, Audrey, and Lori (though at the moment I'm not sure if that was her name) – but I do remember that she looked different than this person now in my apartment.

"Hello?" I called.

"Steve!" Audrey said, more surprised to see me than I was to see her. "What are you doing here?"

"Just came down to grab a few things," I said.

"Well, we heard someone moving around and the dishwasher running," (I had started the dishwasher so I could clean my plates to take with me), "and we thought Shane was back."

"Nope, just me. Where is he, anyway?"

"Oh, that's right, you haven't met him. He's on a business trip. He's *always* on business trips. He's supposed to be back some time today."

“What kind of business,” I ask.

“All kinds,” she says. “He’s got some kind of internet business, and this other business where he and his partner go around selling ATM machines or something like that. He’s so into that... business stuff.”

“That business... stuff?”

“Yeah, that business stuff,” she says with a laugh. “Well, we just came over to feed the cats.”

I hadn’t noticed Sarah go into my old room, but now I see her come out. Apparently, that was where the cats fed. I don’t mind, I had moved to the master at the end of the hall after Keith left. My old room was the room just before it on the right. It was about half the size. They could have it.

“We’re gonna get going,” Audrey said with a smile. “We’ve got a lot of packing to do.”

“See you later,” I say, wondering how they had been able to breathe so freely during their short visit. All three of them were probably cat people. It’s kinda like how a mother can put up with changing diapers and stuff – cat people can deal with cat feces.

“Bye,” says Sarah. The third girl doesn’t say anything, but smiles politely. They head for the door, but I don’t stay around long enough to watch them leave. I go back to my room at the end of the hallway, shut the door, and take a deep, clean breath.

I still have stuff in the old room, so I spend the next half hour dragging it in and sorting it out in my mini-biosphere room. All in all it’s not the best of experiences, but at least the cats do their best to stay out of my way. When I’m not thinking much about it, I mistake the orange one for a cat one of my new roommates up north has, and when it jumps up on me I even start petting it. I remember where I am soon enough and put it back down.

I go back out into the living room to decide which furniture I want to take back. After deciding on a bookcase, I set about cleaning the junk off of it. On top, I find a copy of the New Testament – one of those little ones that people pass out, the ones that have Psalms and Proverbs, too. Underneath is a copy of the Torah, and beside that is a yarmulka. I’ve always found those mildly humorous. Behind all this is one of those black and white photos of a boy and a girl holding hands, where the boy and the girl have been colored in at places with blue and pink pastels. I move all of it to the floor.

I hear a knock on the door. No one I’d want to talk to knocks on the door. Still, I have to see who it is.

I open the door and am surprised to see the mailman.

He’s a wide, tall man, but he looks too tall for his boyish face. His features aren’t particularly handsome, but they are clean. His short brown hair is combed with a hasty part. He looks like an honest fellow.

“Which one are you?” he asks.

“Lavean.”

“Oh,” he says. “That new guy didn’t have a key...” I assume he meant to the mailbox. “...So I’ve been bringing it to him.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking the mail out of his hand. It looks to be at least a week’s worth. He nods and I close the door.

I go to the kitchen to sort it out. Half of it is for Shane, a few for George and Keith, and two ‘late rent’ notices that I pull out and put in my pocket. I’d sent in the last month’s rent a few weeks late and George had been trying to get a hold of me for the last few days to yell at me or

whatever, but I didn't care much. I wasn't the one who subleased our apartment to cat-man without telling anyone. The jerk could yell all he wanted.

I call my brother, who had come down as well to pick up things from a townhouse across town. The truck was delayed, he tells me, "we'll have to stay down here for another day or two."

There's no chance I'm sleeping with the cats. I tell him to come get me. I wait outside the sliding glass door for him to show up, leaving the door pulled back so I'll be able to hear him. He doesn't knock, he just walks right in and calls for me. I walk in through the living room in time to see his nose crinkle.

"Come on," I say, opening the front door for him. I follow him through, shutting the door behind me. I don't think twice about not locking it.