

Under the Bridge

Click, click, click. Women's dress shoes. Coming up the walk. I freeze in place. Damn it. Judith. I can hear her humming to herself as she walks up the front steps.

There's a faint thump just inside the front door. Must have dropped that big briefcase she carries everywhere. I wonder if there's a downstairs bathroom. If she goes upstairs, I can slip out, I open the door further, ready to escape.

Judith must have kicked off her shoes. I can barely hear her steps, but the refrigerator door opens and closes, cupboard, drawer, cupboard again. A pot clanks, grinding sound of a can opener. Kitchen must be right above me. Going to have to wait until she goes upstairs.

I gently close the door, lower myself to the hard floor and tuck my skirt up around my waist. Using the faint light coming through the dirty windows, I crawl, slowly, on hands and knees, stopping every now and then to feel what might be in my path, back to the crib. I try to lower the mattress without a sound, but the plastic cover slips out of my hand and it hits the floor with a gentle whump, sending up a puff of dust. A sneeze rises up the back of my nose. I pinch my nostrils and screw my eyes shut.

When my heart slows back to normal, I crawl onto the mattress and turn myself over to sit. I'm hungry again, but my bigger problem is I have to pee. Try to think of something else, anything else. Judith runs the water in the kitchen sink. Oh dear. If I pee on my skirt I'll be really cold when I get back outside. That's when I notice that like most basement floors, this one slopes gently down to a spot somewhere on the other side of the furnace.

Judith's feet pad toward the front of the house. I heave myself back up on hands and knees, tuck my skirt again, and use my crawl-and-feel method to work my way toward the furnace, letting the slope of the floor guide me. The path to the furnace is wider than most. Someone must come in to service it.

My eyes have adjusted to the darkness. Beyond the furnace are more boxes, more furniture, but a path winding through and, yes, almost to the back wall, the concrete eases down to the black hole of a drain. I squat over it, using the wall to hold myself steady.

Judith listens to CBC radio. There's a certain tone to it. That's what I used to listen to when I was home, at least when there wasn't someone there who had nowhere else to go. Wish I could hear what they're saying.

Maybe she stays up late. Hopefully she watches TV and turns the volume up really loud, though really loud would hardly be Judith's style. In fact, TV probably isn't Judith's style.

By the time Judith is washing her dishes, I'm lying down with the blanket from the arm of the chair more or less spread over me.

She sits down at her table. I can hear the chair pulled out, then in. What is she doing there? Why doesn't she go somewhere else, like upstairs? The furnace grumbles beside me. I'm warm, dozing off. I barely register when she shifts the chair again and turns off the radio.