

Horace and Doris

Doris was washing dishes after supper when she saw that the world was on fire. “Oh dear,” she muttered as she worked her elbow into a particularly stubborn spot of grease.

“Horace, darling?” she called to her husband in the living room. “Did you see that the air is on fire?” She finished drying the china and began to stack plates in neat columns on the credenza by the bay window, making a mental note to buy more dish soap when she next ran to the supermarket. “I don’t remember the weather man saying anything about that this morning.”

Horace, twelve years dead, looked out at the blazing maelstrom consuming the cul-de-sac and sighed. “Of course this happens after I spent all day in the garden. The lilies will be roasted.” He paced the floor, wringing his hands as he moved. “Do ya think Mort’s Greenery is still open?”

Doris furrowed her shriveled gray brow, carving more lines into her wrinkled forehead. “Oh hush dear, you can’t go out now. Your face will melt right off.”

Horace’s melted face turned to hers. “I need new lilies, damn it, or the entire arrangement of the garden will be ruined! We’ll be the laughing stock of the neighborhood, and I’ll have to look at Miller’s smug face every time I walk outside to get

the damn paper.” With each syllable his left eye slid further down his face until the optic nerve fell into his open mouth and tied tangled knots around his teeth.

Doris put away the last of the plates and saw that the pale yellow wallpaper was peeling at the corners. “Don’t be silly darling. The Millers moved away last spring, remember?” She chuckled softly at Horace’s fading memory. That man would forget his head if it wasn’t fixed to his shoulders.

Horace caught his melted head in his hands as it fell off his shoulders. “Damn it, woman, I’m going out and that’s final!” The disembodied head finished speaking just before its jaw sloughed off and hit the floor with a wet smack. Horace cradled the head in his right arm as he opened the door with his left, stumbled through the doorway, and let the searing inferno outside slam the door shut behind him.

Doris returned to the sink and started to work on the silverware. She turned the faucet handle and watched the water flow over the cutlery, and it struck her that the world wasn’t on fire – it was underwater. The world was underwater and the world couldn’t swim and no, stop, don’t remember that it drowned, the world drowned, Horace drowned, Horace lay half-swallowed by the ocean floor. She leaned against the bay window and watched his bodies float by, one by one.

Doris wiped a tear from her eye and stared at it, puzzled. Then she walked back to the sink, picked up a spoon, and worked her elbow into a particularly stubborn spot of grease.

“Horace, darling?” she called to an empty chair in the living room.