

Owen Binder

by Margaret Verble

Owen squeezed through his condo door, turned tightly, and flipped the lock. He tossed his tie onto a pile of clothes on his couch and threaded a path between chairs, boxes, and stacks of papers. In the kitchen, he plucked a package of Ramen noodles from a stash in a cabinet and moved a pot of crusted chili off the stove onto a stack of Diet Coke cases. He pulled a garbage pail away from the dishwasher's door and pulled out a pot ringed with egg whites. He ran water to the level of the rings and set the pot on a burner. The Diet Coke cases blocked the silverware drawer. Owen turned back to the dishwasher, but found only dirty knives and forks in the basket. He lifted a plate in the sink and spied what he wanted. He held the spoon up to the light. Brown and green blotches. He searched a cabinet for liquid detergent, pulled out a bottle of Windex and put it back in. He pulled out a bottle of 409 and, finally, a bottle of Murphy's Oil Soap. He read the directions. The soap was for wood. He squirted some onto the spoon.

When the water boiled, he dumped in the noodles and started counting. At 180, he turned off the burner and shook a packet of seasoning over the pot. He poured the water into the sink, emptied the pasta into a bowl, and pulled a can of Coke from the refrigerator. He placed the drink, spoon, and bowl on a tray and weaved through a path to a table. He set the tray in an opening of inches, plopped down on a chair with a padded seat, and picked up an adventure comic.

Zana was being pursued by a pirate with a scar down his cheek, a feather in his hat, and x-ray vision. Owen's noodles were too hot to eat. He blew and read, blew and read. Blew and read

some more. Pain zapped the back of his head. Zana and the pirate dropped to the floor. Owen's face fell into his bowl.

"There's this smell," Mrs. Stigers said to her condo manager when she opened her door. She'd hesitated to bother Ms. Calvert, but she was afraid the odor would settle into her living room like her late husband's cigarette smoke had invaded the furniture she'd previously owned. She wanted to keep her chairs, couch, and lamps new for as long as she could. Besides, the smell was distressing.

Ms. Calvert, a tall, lean woman who'd previously worked in a bank, said, "A dead mouse?" The mice were more of a problem during the winter, but they could be trying to find shelter inside from the heat. Outside it was 105, and there was no telling what the little rodents would do. She spent much of her time designing their demise.

"No, I don't think it's a mouse. It's stronger. More . . ." Words failed Mrs. Stigers. Her nostrils flared. She recalled her old compost heap. She wondered if the people who'd bought her house were keeping her flowerbeds up. They'd need to water every evening.

Ms. Calvert opened her door wider and invited Mrs. Stigers in. She'd been hoping to see more of her new resident. She thought she had real possibilities. She'd had new furniture delivered, put up curtains that didn't look cheap, and drove a fairly new car. The condos were on five floors, but Ms. Calvert's rooms were behind the reception area, so she couldn't monitor Mrs. Stigers's activities as thoroughly as she wanted. However, her kitchen window opened onto the residents' parking lot; by washing dishes by

hand, she was able to track comings and goings. Mrs. Stigers appeared to have grown children who hadn't visited her since moving her in. Ms. Calvert said, "The garbage was collected on Thursday."

"Yes. I don't think it's garbage. Please call me 'Minnie.'" Minnie liked the paintings on her manager's walls. They were of Paris or of somewhere in Italy. She couldn't tell which; but they definitely weren't of Memphis. She'd stayed at the Venetian in Las Vegas. She felt like she could relate to someone with foreign tastes.

Ms. Calvert said, "I will, if you'll call me 'Lou.' It's short for 'Louisa.' No one ever called me that except the grandmother I was named for." She thought of her Gran, a stocky woman, who, in a picture next to her bed, wore a dress printed with little flowers.

"Well, Lou, it's heavy odor. More like a dead deer."

"A dead deer?" Lou thought of her grandmother again. She shook her head. "Where's it coming from?"

"It's hard to say." But Minnie thought she knew exactly where. Owen Binder's condo. However, if she were wrong, Owen would feel offended, and she wanted to get along with her neighbors. She'd bought her condo because it was near a grocery, drugstore, and beauty salon. She'd need the location when her children took her car away some day. Besides, her closest friend on her old street had died two years ago in May.

Lou knew as much about the motivations of residents as she did about killing mice. She could tell Minnie was withholding information. She replied, "Is it from one of the other condos?"

Minnie blushed. She glanced toward a painting of people under umbrellas walking a rainy street. "Maybe."

"Which one?"

"The furthest one from the elevator, I think." She fidgeted with a necklace her daughter had given her at Christmas.

"That would be, let me see..." Lou looked up to her ceiling to help her place who lived on Minnie's floor. The Cummings were in 301. They really resided in Arkansas; came in only for ballgames. 302 was Jerry Ford. Easy to remember because he had a President's name. He was an intern; spent most of his time at the hospital. Alice Goodman was in 303. She kept a cat in violation of condo rules. Lou considered the cat her ally against the mice and looked the other way on that. But Alice was out of town on business for the week. She didn't know what arrangements had been made for the pet. She said, "Does it smell like a dead cat?"

Minnie knew about the cat, too. "I don't think so. It's heavier than that."

Lou pursed her lips. That left Owen Binder. She picked up her phone off her table, scrolled through her contacts, and hit Owen's number. She raised her eyebrows and smiled at Minnie.

Minnie smiled back. But to keep from staring at her resident manager, she looked at her toes. She couldn't help but notice that Lou's carpet was better than hers. That was to be expected, she guessed.

"Well, he's either not home or not answering." Lou slipped her phone into her pocket and pursed her lips. She suspected the latter. Owen kept mostly to himself.

"I knocked on the door. He didn't answer."

Lou, of course, had a key. But she didn't want to appear eager to use it. She had some principles, and creeping around her residents' condos really wasn't one of them. Furthermore, she wanted Minnie to feel confident of that. She said, "I don't know what else I can do."

"I'm afraid something's happened to Mr. Binder. Something bad, if you know what I mean," Minnie replied.

Lou's eyes rounded. She hadn't realized the smell was that strong. "You don't mean...?"

"Yes, I do."

"Oh, my goodness. I probably should come smell for myself."

When the elevator door opened on the third floor, the women were smacked by the

odor. Minnie started to get out, but Lou grabbed her arm and punched the ground floor button. As soon as the door closed, she said, "We'll call the police."

They waited for the police in chairs in the lobby. Looking out on the heat of the day, they exchanged basic facts of where from, Biloxi, Mississippi, and Covington, Tennessee, how many marriages, three and one, how many children, one and two, favorite vacation spots, Branson, Missouri, and Las Vegas, favorite movie stars, Brad Pitt both. They were agreeing on Brad when Jerry Ford came through the door followed by a wave of heat. He was wearing bags under his eyes and a loose tie. A rumpled white jacket was slung over his shoulder. Lou jumped to her feet. "Dr. Ford, just the person we need to see."

Jerry was used to hijackers. Senior doctors and nurses spun him through tasks and patients twenty hours a day. But his desire to help hadn't yet disappeared. He said, "What's the problem?"

The two women looked at each other. Their lips moved like carp mouthing bait, but neither wanted to voice the word, "Dead." Jerry extended his chin and cocked his head. Nothing happened. He pulled his chin back in. He looked from one woman to another and back again. Finally, Lou said, "Have you noticed a smell on your floor?"

Jerry flashed on his sink of dirty dishes. His face flushed. "I'm sorry. I've been busy. I've delivered three babies in the last 36 hours. I'll take care of it."

Lou and Minnie exchanged looks. Minnie said, "I don't believe we've met. I'm Minnie Stigers. I'm in 304."

Jerry smiled. "Nice to meet you. Jerry Ford. I'm sorry about the smell. I'll tend to it."

"I don't think that's going to be possible." Minnie dropped her eyes to the floor again. Dr. Ford's shoes were scruffy.

"We believe something's happened to Owen Binder," Lou offered. "We've called the police. But they've been delayed, and maybe we need a doctor instead."

"Owen Binder?" Jerry didn't know his neighbors.

Lou said, "In 300."

"Yes, of course. He's ill?"

"We're afraid he's past ill," Minnie interjected.

"I see." Jerry ran his hand through his hair.

"I have a key. I don't like to use it. But you're a doctor, and this could be an emergency."

Jerry wanted to go to bed. And although he missed his cadaver, he didn't care for corpses he didn't know. "Have you called 911?" he asked.

The women exchanged looks. "We phoned the police," Lou said. "Maybe they weren't the right ones to call?"

"Let me try 911." Jerry drew his phone out of his pocket. After a moment, he said, "This is Dr. Ford at 7357 Poplar Avenue. I need an ambulance and some paramedics." He paused and continued, "The nature of the emergency is a . . ." Jerry didn't want to say, "Bad smell." "Could you just get them here? . . . I am calm. . . We need an ambulance here. . . I'm telling you all I know. . . That's Jerry Ford. . . Yes, like the President." His next pause was longer. Lou and Minnie tilted toward him. He pursed his lips. Eventually he said, "No" and "No" again. He said one more "No" and an "Okay" before he slipped his phone back into his pocket. He widened his stance and said to the women, "She suggested we go in."

Lou drew from her pocket a key on a chain with a trinket. She held it toward Jerry. He said, "You two wait here. When the paramedics arrive, bring them up." He put on his jacket.

Lou and Minnie felt too nervous to sit. They stood and stared out the glass on the front of the building. A car turned into the front parking lot, its windows rolled up against the heat. The driver was a black woman wearing a large hat. The car didn't stop. Minnie said, "She's turning around."

After that, nothing at all happened until the elevator doors opened again. Jerry's face was grim. He said, "Someone needs to call the M.E."

Minnie said, "M.E.?"

"Sorry. Medical Examiner. He's dead."

"Oh," Minnie sighed and wobbled toward a chair. "My, my." She rested her head in her hand.

Lou said, "Who should do that?"

Jerry looked down at his hospital I.D. "I guess it should be me."

After that call, they all sat, the women in chairs, Jerry on the floor with his arms around his legs. He'd never seen anything like Owen's apartment, and he wasn't tidy himself. But the corpse was worse. Something had gnawed its ears, fingers, and neck. Jerry was mentally picturing slides of corpses he'd seen in Pathology, trying to determine the origin of the bites, when Lou said, "I wish somebody would come."

"Nine-one-one said they'd send somebody. It's too late now, of course. I guess I should call them off." Jerry drew his phone out of his pocket, punched in the number and waited. Minnie could hear the ring in her chair. It reminded her of how long it'd been since she'd talked to her daughter. She thought maybe if she wrote some recipes out and sent them in the mail, she might get a call. She was thinking about a broccoli casserole dish when Jerry said, "You'd think 911 would answer their phone."

Lou said, "My neighbor's house once burned to the ground waiting for the fire department, and they were only two blocks away. Fortunately, no one was killed." Most of that story was stretched. The house had burned, but only the kitchen, and the fire department was tardy, but did arrive. Lou gave herself license to exaggerate when she was making new friends.

Minnie said, "I was once caught on a plane for six hours because of a fire in the St. Louis airport. We waited and waited. They wouldn't let us get off, even after the fire was over. One woman started sobbing hysterically and couldn't stop. And this was before 9/11. There was just no excuse. My husband was furious." She thought of her departed spouse. She was always glad to recall occasions when his spite was warranted.

Jerry had a sense it was his turn to share. And he wanted to remove his mind from his neighbor's chewed corpse. He said, "I once waited five days to get my electricity turned back on. I was living in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and we had an ice storm. Took down a lot of the trees and telephone poles." Jerry didn't add that he'd been only six at the time and had been taken to his grandmother's home in Nashville, where the storm hadn't reached.

After that, Lou told a flood story where, at the peak of the water, the family had ended up in the hayloft. It wasn't her flood; it was her grandmother's, but she'd heard the story over and over, and she'd been her Gran's favorite, and that was out of eleven. She hoped neither of her new friends asked her what year the waters had risen. It was 1943, six years before she was born.

Mention of the flood pulled Minnie's mind to her father. He was wading the Hatchie River at night, with a light, gigging frogs. She was in the boat, slapping mosquitoes. But her mother's fried frogs' legs made the bites worthwhile. They were greasy and tender, and Minnie wished it were still possible to get fresh frogs' legs. She guessed it was, but certainly not from the store.

Jerry suddenly felt relaxed. He leaned back on his elbows. A criticism he'd received from a nurse early that morning floated out the tinted windows of the lobby into the parking lot heat.

The air conditioning hummed a comforting noise. Lou took courage from her portion of that comfort and said, "How was it, you know, upstairs?"

Jerry was relaxed enough to feel some remorse over never giving Owen Binder the time of day. He'd recently finished a Psych rotation and it was clear to him that Owen had suffered from a hoarding disorder. He'd developed empathy for the hospitalized mentally ill; he wished he'd extended that goodwill to his neighbor. He said, "He seems to have been dead a few days. He wasn't in very good shape." He turned to look through the window. Maybe

somebody was on the way.

Lou said, "Oh dear." Her thoughts moved to the cost of industrially cleaning the condo, but then she recalled Owen's relatives would have to pay that bill. She let that worry go. She said, "I don't think he had many friends."

Minnie said, "I never saw anybody go in there. But I've only been here eight weeks. Do you know who to contact?" She looked at Lou.

Lou was just thinking about that. She had Owen's connections on her computer. She started to suggest they all go into her living room and she'd look them up. But she was worried they'd leave her if she did, so she said, "I believe so. But I can't say right now who it is."

Jerry thought of his last girl friend. He had put her down as his contact, but she had moved to Dallas when their romance had fizzled. Since then, he'd made do with his imagination and a towel. He thought of the nurse who'd chewed him out. She was attractive, but old; maybe thirty-five. Although, a difference of six years wasn't that much: she was still young enough to have children.

Minnie had put her daughter down as her contact. She hoped she would come to visit on her birthday. She lived in Jackson, not far away. To stave off her yearning, she said, "What did he do for a living?"

"Checked groceries. But his family has some money. His fees are paid by somebody else." Lou didn't say they were paid by his father; she wanted her residents to feel confident in her discretion.

"I guess he'll be missed at the grocery," Minnie offered. She tried to recall if she'd ever seen Owen at her store. She'd seen him once in the hallway. He was heavy, balding, and clean-shaven. Would she have recognized him at a register?

Lou looked at her watch. "You'd think between the police, 911, and the Medical Examiner somebody would come." They all looked out the window. The glass was gray, the visitors' parking lot empty, the road traffic slow, but moving. Jerry said, "It's not bumper to bumper.

They can get through."

Minnie said, "Maybe they'll be here soon." Then she thought about going upstairs, but the smell was penetrating her living room. She decided to stay downstairs as long as she could.

Lou said, "I have some gazpacho. We could leave my door cracked and hear anyone who comes into the lobby."

Jerry's stomach growled. He hadn't eaten since 5:30 AM.

Minnie said, "I love gazpacho. And I don't think I could eat anything heavy with . . . you know." Her eyes rose to the ceiling.

Lou had bread and wine, too. Chardonnay. Toward the bottom of the bottle, Minnie said to Jerry, "I wish my daughter had married somebody like you. She never comes to visit. It's because her husband won't come with her."

Jerry felt flattered. And someone thinking of him as marriageable was reassuring. However, he was self-deprecating by nature, and he replied, "It's hard to be married to a doctor. We're never at home. And when we are, we're exhausted." It was then that he noticed he felt better than he had in days.

Lou said, "My second husband's brother was a doctor. Very distinguished. Practiced in Philadelphia. I wonder if he's still alive."

Minnie said, "You could look him up on the internet."

Lou had only seen her former brother-in-law once, at a stiff dinner where her husband had accused him of using up their parents' entire college fund. She said, "That's a good idea. I'll do that tomorrow, after . . . you know" She looked to the ceiling.

Jerry said, "There'll have to be an investigation."

Minnie said, "Are you suggesting foul play?" A mixture of dread and excitement stirred in her chest.

"Not necessarily. Any death out of the hospital, without a doctor in attendance, that's almost an automatic. But the circumstances are a bit strange."

Minnie leaned in. Lou leaned back. Both

narrowed their eyes. There was a moment of silence. Then Lou said, "You'd better tell us."

Jerry had seen both family members and medical students keel over at the sight of blood. But mental images of unseen conditions were often even worse. He said, "His condo is even messier than mine."

Lou said, "How long do you think he's been dead?"

Jerry had taken a course in Forensic Pathology, but it'd been a while back. He said, "I didn't want to touch the body. And it's hard to say without examining it." He realized too late that he shouldn't have said, "the body" and "it." They were teaching him to use more person-oriented language when talking to civilians. He winced.

Minnie saw the wince. "It was pretty bad, wasn't it?"

Jerry was not much of a drinker, and he was exhausted. Before he could stop himself, he said, "Yes," and added, "He had some bites."

Minnie gasped. She said, "What? Mosquitoes?" and, "Could I please have a little more wine?"

Lou was hoping someone would offer her an excuse to open another bottle. She didn't drink often, but this was an exceptional circumstance.

Jerry said. "Not mosquitoes. Bigger."

Lou's arm was in the refrigerator when she heard that. But she instantly knew what it meant. She said, "My niece gave me this bottle last Christmas. I've been saving it for a special occasion." She handed Jerry the wine and corkscrew. She wanted to steer clear of the subject of the bites, so she said, "I know you're exhausted, but a career as a doctor is worth the investment."

Jerry hoped that was true, but his brother had gone into corporate accounting and was already, he'd heard ad nauseam, making six figures. He said, "You only go around once. You want it to count for something." Owen's body filtered into his mind, but his brother's new house and pool swam over that image.

Lou said, "I wanted to be a teacher. But I

got married my freshman year at Old Miss and got off track." She recalled her first husband, the owner of a bright yellow Camino. She held the Camino culpable for that five-year mistake.

Minnie realized then that they were having a party. It was the first one she'd been to since moving. It was really the first one she'd been to in a long, long time. The pictures of France or Italy on the walls were beginning to look festive. She wanted to say, "I hope nobody ever comes, and we can stay right here." But she knew if she voiced that, it would ruin everything. She hoped Owen Binder wouldn't mind. She told herself that if he'd been there he'd be having a good time. ▲▼▲



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