

~ Cleaning ~

A Short Story by Mari Wells

I put the bottle of wine in the bucket. That was the last of the preparation now all that was left was to wait. It was seven forty-five, Gwen said she'd be here at seven forty. I shouldn't worry about five minutes. Gwen was usually a little late every time we had a date. I understood it's hard for her kids to let her go, even for two hours.

This time I was worried, though, it'd taken three months to convince her to come to my place so I could make her dinner. At first, she'd say no. I wouldn't take no for an answer though. Finally, she confessed, she felt it was too dangerous. I felt a pain in my stomach, I wish she'd trust me, but I understood. This world wasn't safe anymore.

A quick glance at my watch showed she was later than usual. My shoulders fell I was about to stand up and put the wine away when my cell rang. My heart jumped when I saw her name on the screen. "Hi Gwen," I answered.

"Steve, I'm lost, I've been driving up and down Buckland Road. I can't find our turn off." "Where are you?"

She did her best to describe her surroundings in the dark. I helped her find the exit. I peeked out the window. She was standing next to her car looking up at the sky. She crossed herself. I didn't know she was religious. She stuffed something in her pocket, bent into the backseat. She pulled out a dish of something and made her way to the door.

I waited for a knock before opening it. I couldn't look desperate. "Thanks for coming," I looked down at the covered dish.

"I know you said not to bring anything but. . ." she pulled the top off, a chocolate cake with Raspberries on top. "I couldn't resist."

"You shouldn't have, but thank you."

I stood aside for her to come in, "Please have a seat."

"Where can I put this?"

I took it from her and walked to the kitchen. I could hear her walking behind me. "Would you care for a glass of wine?"

She eyed me, her shoulders tensed.

"I'm not trying anything. Promise," I said crossing my heart.

A smile played on her lips. "I'll only have one glass," she paused and looked over her shoulder, "I'm *driving home later.*"

I nodded.

"A glass now or with dinner?"

"Um. . ." she looked around the kitchen, "with dinner. Can I have some water?"

I poured her a glass of water and handed it to her. She took it in both hands and looked at it for a long time before taking a sip. Something wasn't right with her, was she that nervous I would try something or maybe even hurt her. "Shall we eat?"

Her grip on the glass caused her knuckles to turn white. She nodded quickly. I pulled out the chair for her. She smiled as she sat down. Her grip on the glass didn't ease all the while I served the meal. Something was wrong. Please don't be like the last woman and leave. I really liked Gwen. I poured the wine and sat down.

She looked over her shoulder again. "Is there someone else here?" she finally asked.

"No, we're alone."

She sighed and took a sip of the wine. Her eyes scanned the room behind me. She was searching for something, but what? She took a small bite and tensed again. She twisted in her seat towards the right. Her left hand balled into a fist. She inhaled deeply her breasts rose as she took in the air and fell as she exhaled. If she saw me watching, she'd think I was up to no good.

"Is everything okay?" I asked through a clenched jaw.

She turned around and forced a smile. She wanted to say something, but couldn't. She picked up her fork and took another bite. Our eyes met, I could see she was worried.

"I'm sorry," she said and got up. Her head twisted to the right again. "What's down there?" she asked me pointing down the hall.

"My bedroom," I tried to keep a straight face, "the restroom, and a few other rooms."

She started walking to the door. Before pulling it open she turned, "Are you coming?" she asked before she went outside.

This was strange, the last woman just left. She didn't ask me to follow her. I got up and took a gulp of the wine. I knew where this was going and I couldn't face it sober.

When I got to the door she was leaning against her car, her head cocked back looking at the sky. She didn't move as I walked down the drive to where

she was. I leaned against the car and waited. She didn't move or say a word. I turned to look at her, a tear ran down the side of her face.

"Are you leaving now?" it was all I could ask.

A soft breeze ruffled her hair. "I'm not what you think," she said never moving her eyes from the sky.

How could I respond to this?

"I need to tell you something. . ." There was pain in her voice; it cracked often while she spoke. "But I'm not sure how you will take it."

I prepared for the break up. "I've found its best just to say what needs to be said."

A brief nod of the head, she was conversing with something in the sky, that's what it looked like. "Have you ever had another woman here? Not your wife?"

I looked up into the black night sky, a sliver of the moon and a few stars were there. How was I supposed to answer this?

Honesty I decided was the best way. "Yeah,"

"It ended badly?"

I nodded. Now she would definitely leave, I fail at this.

She inhaled deeply "I'm a witch! Your ex was too. She placed a spell that won't let any female in your house." She pushed the words out so fast I wasn't sure I heard her correctly.

I turned to look at her, was she serious, it was the worst break-up line, I'd ever heard. Tears were filling her eyes.

"Steve I'm a witch." She said much slower. "Your ex-wife was one too. There is a spell here. It won't let any woman come in without absolute stress." She looked down at her feet.

This was incredible. I couldn't believe it. "I saw you cross yourself."

"Old habits die hard," she shrugged.

Okay, whatever but I would have known if Rachel were a witch. We were married for 13 years; I would have seen something, but the look on her face. I felt like she was telling the truth.

"Your other date couldn't be there. I tried to fight off the feeling. I wanted to understand it."

A chill ran down my back. "It's impossible Gwen. I would have seen something if she was a witch."

She shook her head. "We have a way of hiding our practice. Those who aren't trusted aren't to know."

I looked at her again, carefully this time. She was so sad, and tense, but there was a peace about her.

“It feels good to admit that to you.” She sighed. “You don’t know how it feels to keep that a secret.”

Something washed over me.

I felt my pride swell because she trusted me to tell me this. I looked at the house; my house was cursed never to let another woman inside.

How would I see Gwen again.

“Could I move?” I asked without thinking about it.

“I’m not sure if part isn’t on you.” She sighed.

“If you’re a witch could you take it off?”

Her shoulders slumped, “I don’t know.” She looked up at me. “I guess I could try.”

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I didn’t know what to say, the rest of the night went by in a blur. She said she would call me next week. I waited, secretly hoping she would, but thinking it unlikely. On Thursday, she called, she asked if she could try to cast a cleaning spell Friday night.

It would be late and I wouldn’t be allowed inside while she was doing it. It sounded strange; she asked if I trusted her. This question was so strange I was still thinking about it.

‘You won’t leave, just not go inside. You can check everything when I come out.’ Did she think I was thinking she’d rob me? I had to make this right. I told her it would be fine and step up the details.

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She said she’d be here at eleven o’clock at night. I wasn’t supposed to be inside of my house for thirty minutes before she got here. Luckily, the weather was warm. I sat on the hood of the car and messed around online. That’s how I met her, a few years ago. We were both married at the time.

Slowly my marriage fell apart then hers.

The glow of the headlights told me she was pulling into the driveway. I turned off the cell and waved as she parked. She smiled and reached to the side, she pulled a duffle bag with her.

“Hi Steve,” she said.

I couldn’t say anything something was radiating from her. She wore all black and her pale face glowed in the night. I was awe struck.

“Are you okay?” she asked looking me up and down.

“Yeah, of course,” I said trying to get back my cool. “What do you want me to do? Or do I just sit here?”

She smiled and her glow turned brighter. “I’m going to need you to say a few things then you can chill on the hood again.” she smiled mischievously.

I felt so happy. “Wait for just a minute, and then I’ll call you. I’ll whisper what you need to say. I’ll tap your hand when it’s time for you to sit down.”

“Okay.” What else could I say?

I’d never seen anything like this. I did even think it was real before Gwen told me. Would a storm break through the still night, or would demons appear, I didn’t want to think about Gwen that way.

“I won’t call the elements and I don’t work with evil.” She said softly.

“Can you always hear me?”

“I can’t hear you; I just understand what you’d think.”

She kneeled into the dirt; she kept looking up into the sky. The moon I would guess. She laid some things out in front of her.

“Come,” she said holding her hand out towards me.

I stood next to her as she stayed kneeling. She whispered and I repeated, I thought it would be much more complicated, but it was simple and outright. She squeezed my hand.

I looked down at her this must be her signal. I stepped back not knowing if there was some sort of respect I was suppose to show who or whatever she was in contact with.

She gathered her bell and some sticks and walked to the front door. She stood there and moved one hand around then the bell dinged. She moved across the outside of the house stopping at each window, door and every corner. The bell would ding before she’d move on. When she came to the front door, she kneeled down again before she disappeared inside.

I could only guess what she was doing inside. The bell continued dinging.

I thought I could see the house move; I rubbed my eyes several times. It seemed to shake like a shiver moving through someone.

She came back outside shortly after the last series of dings. Her right hand moved to her mouth signaling me to stay quiet. I didn’t move. She turned and faced the house again the bell dinged three times before she fell to her knees.

I ran towards her I needed to check on her. Her left hand shot up, halting me. Her torso stretched out in front of her until her head touched the ground. She stayed like that for a few more minutes before rising to a kneeling position. She bowed one more time and hopped into standing in one

graceful move.

I've never seen a woman move that fast. She stayed in the same spot and kicked the dirt around. "Help," she sighed.

I walked towards her and looked at her.

"Help to loosen the dirt."

I bent down and picked up her duffel bag, and then I kicked at the dirt loosening more than she did in several kicks.

She took my hand and pulled me from the spot.

Her eyes glowed with a calm peaceful fire, but I could tell she was tired, she moved slower now. "I can't be back for a few weeks. You'll need to bring another woman here and see if she can stay."

She placed her right hand on my left cheek.

"I think I did, but the house knows me now. It will accept me no matter what." She whispered. "Thank you," I said caressing my cheek against her hand.

"I'll be back, you'll let me," she smiled.

I nodded.

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