

Dishes
by Amy Lasslett
Third Prize

I stand on the well-worn linoleum. Two stains mark the floor in front of the kitchen sink. Thousands of dishes have been washed in this spot. My hands soak in warm water as I wash chipped coffee mugs and Tupperware containers. The markers of community are all around. The murmurs of laughter, the smell of instant coffee. Barefoot children run on worn carpet between church pews. It's organised chaos. I watch an infant being passed around; each new person delighted by its trust and blue eyes.

I look through the window above the sink. The courtyard is packed with people. Two gruff men with grey beards and black jeans share a cigarette. With every exhale their smoke billows up into the sky past the spire. An Elder stands in line for a free fed. A teen from the flats says, "Here Uncle" as he gives him a sausage in bread. I see a woman laughing at something no one else can see. She is as thin as a rake and high as a kite, but no one polices her. Thy kingdom come, I think as I breathe in deep, slowly exhale and rub the soapy bubbles from the sink between my fingers.

"Would you like some help?" I turn to see a broad shouldered, brown eyed stranger holding a tea towel. They look clean, wholesome, and as though they aren't from 'round here. I look down at their long arms. I look up at their tender eyes. I notice they are timid, a little fearful.

"Sure," I respond.

As they stand next to me, I sense every micro movement between us. It's like an invisible tape measure links an electric current from them to me. The hairs on my neck prick up and my mouth dries. We look in each other's eyes and hold the stare. I feel caught. I feel seen and I want to hide.

They grab a plate out of the dish rack and begin to dry it. I stare at their thick eyebrows, their earlobes and top lip. I'm smitten and I don't even know them. They reach to my left and put away a plate. They are in my space, and it is both safe and terrifying. Are they feeling this too? Are they as afraid as me? Flustered, I move forward and push my stomach against the bench. I feel water from the sink soak into the front of my dress. My heart pounds as they place their hand on my shoulder to balance themselves.

Then fear arrives. It lands heavy on my chest like a brick. It floods my mind with danger. Run. Get out of here. Move! Who is looking? What can they see? This is not okay. Instantly I put down the dish cloth and bolt

out of the room. I weave through the packed congregation and out into the lane way.

It's cold and dark out there. The sun is blocked by tall buildings. I breathe, I squat against the bluestone building and I comfort myself. Relax, breathe, all is well.

All people saw was two women in a kitchen.