**Half-Light**

Diane Raven

He lay on the dark floor, small and pale, in the dimness of his barren room with the big-screen TV blasting away—all but drowning out his yells for help. His tiny arms, covered with red, dry, scaly patches, were bent at the elbows, and his knobby fingers were stubbornly locked across his chest. I knelt down beside him just as the sun was rising—a narrow ray of golden light lit up the floor, along the edge of the couch, where skin, hair and food particles had accumulated like a tideline. As I looked down at him, amidst the sinuous line of debris, I felt my chest tighten as though I were suffocating.

I watched the vapor of shame spew from his mouth and rise into the widening shaft of sunlight.

He was angry and embarrassed. Understandable. *So, relax*, I thought. *Count to 10, and just listen to him.*

“Help me up. Once I fall, I cannot get up by myself. Just help me up.”

“Joe, I think we should call 911 and wait for the EMTs.”

He heaved a sigh, and his lips tightened into a thin, gray line.

“Did you hit your head, Joe?”

“No. I did not hit my head. I repeat. I did not hit my head.”

Smiling, I said, “Otherwise, how was your day?” I considered his faint laugh and feeble smile an act of courage. “Joe, is there a family member you’d like me to call?”

He unclasped his hands and formed two, tight, translucent fists. He hesitated, unclenched his fists, pressed his palms together and said, “Maybe my sister Alyse. Anyway, she’s the closest.”

He had no difficulty remembering her number. I called Alyse and shared that I was her brother’s neighbor, down the hall, and that when I left my apartment, I heard him yelling for help. When I opened his door, I saw him on the floor lying under his walker. I told her that he fell, but appeared cognizant, had no apparent broken bones and was not bleeding except for a left-eye hemorrhage, which only looked alarming under the circumstances.

“I’ll call 911,” Alyse said. “They have the code to get into the building. We’re on our way.”

Within minutes, the EMTs arrived, assessed the scene, checked his vitals, and asked him a series of questions about the accident and his medications. After the head-to-toe assessment, they lifted him to his feet so that he could support himself with his walker. When Alyse and her husband walked into the apartment, Joe hung his head like a guilty child. I pretended not to notice the family dynamics on full display.

We introduced ourselves, and they thanked me. I left Joe’s apartment feeling good about being able to help, but I couldn’t shake my undeniable rush to judgment. His apartment was lifeless—bare walls, no plants: just a couch, a lift chair, a kitchen table with two chairs, and that big-screen TV. Soda cans and bottled water were scattered on the kitchen counter, and the cracks between the couch cushions were stuffed with used tissues.

As I walked out of Joe’s apartment and headed back to mine, I felt pale and clammy. I leaned against the hallway wall. *Jeez*, I thought, *get it together, and move on with the day. Why am I feeling like this? And I can’t believe I’m judging him—wrong thoughts at the wrong time. Who does that?*

I left the building for an appointment and returned two hours later. As I turned into the driveway, Alyse and her husband stood on the sidewalk while the EMTs pushed the gurney out of the front entrance, lifted it, and loaded it into the ambulance. I parked in the garage and took the stairs to my apartment; I assumed the worst.

There was nothing more I could do to help Joe, but I desperately needed to understand the adverse reaction I had while in his apartment. The only way I knew how to do that was to write. Not far into the process of describing the incident, a vivid, childhood memory flashed as quickly and unexpectedly as my bias against Joe and his living conditions; when I saw Joe’s forearms and elbows, it triggered memories of my grandmother’s skin. She had the same red, dry, scaly patches as Joe. And, like Joe, her skin sloughed off her arms like fish being scaled. I also recalled that, as a child, I had an obscure repulsion when I saw the accumulated shed skin that covered the floor surrounding her black, leather chair. By piecing together the memory fragments, the unexpected, visceral response made more sense. My grandmother never spoke of her condition, and why would she? A grandchild’s love should be unconditional. I came to realize that I didn’t love her the way I could have.

Later, while watching night come through the expansive windows in my apartment, I waited for Mercury to appear in the half-light. Still brooding and a bit anxious over all that had happened earlier, I caught myself running my fingers over my arms and elbows.