

The Container

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She began to get headaches in the winter. Dull throbs and chills and a fever just above normal. She sat in bed and checked her temperature every two hours. This is too long, she thought, it's been weeks of headaches and low-grade fevers and this can't be normal—in fact, it's not normal, it's just above. She ventured into the hallway to ask the neighbors who passed by flipping through the mail whether they knew about such conditions as headaches and they paused to listen and discuss possible maladies. They agreed that it was possible, not too likely, but possible that she had a gas leak in her apartment, which could cause headaches and death and so on and shouldn't go unchecked. Anyway it's free to check—those gas people are so nutso about leaks and she should call the gas people, and she did.

Much faster than she expected, twenty minutes after the call, two gas men knocked on the door. They had on gas-man suits and carried liquid-filled containers and instruments with long antennas that they pointed at objects. The instruments beeped and ticked and the men walked through her apartment beeping and ticking and tapping and lifting oven lids and frowning into heat ducts, and she was brave and stood to one side and watched and answered their questions about headaches and fevers.

Then the gas men said there was no gas leak in any room, everything was tip-top and the headaches would go away, perhaps, if she didn't stay cooped up so much, if she went for more walks, for example, and that was an unpleasant comment, she thought, but she thanked them and showed them out. She stood in the hallway and rocked on her heels. She went back inside and into the kitchen.

There on the kitchen table sat a container. It had a long stick coming out of the top, much like a plunger, and two shadowy warning labels taped to the side: Danger. Hazardous. And: Not Responsible for Spillage or Leakage, Dispose of Properly, in smaller print below.

She ran out the door to the street, but the gas men were gone, and then she ran up the stairs to her apartment and into the kitchen. And the container was still there. It had a blue fluid in it which had to be thick because when she tipped the container the fluid moved slowly. She called the number she had called to get the gas men the first time.

Your gas men left their container in my apartment, she said to the man who answered the phone. The man asked her to describe it and she did. She told about the plunger sticking out and the blue fluid and the man on the phone put her on hold and then came back and

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asked her to describe it again and she read the warning labels firmly and twice and told him about the plunger coming out again and about the slow-moving blue fluid again and the man put her on hold again and then he came back and said, That's not ours.

Who else's would it be? she wanted to know.

Are you sure it wasn't there before they arrived? he asked.

No, it wasn't here, she said. She knew that for a fact and he put her on hold again. She sat on hold and looked at the container until he came back. He gave her a 1-800 number she could call for a dump site. There was one in Wyoming and one in Arizona. But I'm in Chicago, she said, and this is yours, not mine. The man hung up and she was alone with the container.

She went out into the hallway and asked the neighbors who passed by flipping through mail what they thought. Everyone came over to look at it, stopped in the doorway of the kitchen and peered in, made jokes about driving to Wyoming, but finally decided they were concerned and said, Are you going to leave that in the building, that nuclear waste? And she was concerned herself, called the 1-800 number and listened to the recorded message of directions off the interstate to the dump site. She called several times, sat in bed with the phone and a box of crackers, which she ate slowly, one small bite at a time, sucking on each biteful. Now the fever was gone. Now she was nauseated and nothing helped except to lie perfectly still and suck on small cracker bits and have one hand on the phone and not think about the container.

The neighbors slid notes under the door, messages scribbled on the backs of envelopes, Have you resolved the situation? She crept to the door and watched out the peephole at the neighbors gathering and whispering. They didn't flip through mail anymore but waited in clumps in the hallway, smoked cigarettes, and examined what looked like blueprints. They kept an eye on her door. Sometimes she could hear snatches of their conversation. She'll never part with it, they hissed from behind raised collars. She thought that was unfair. No one had asked her for it. She would have handed it over earlier and gladly had someone asked but no one did and she began to feel indignant and protective. After all none of this was her fault and, in fact, if it was anyone's fault it was the neighbors' whose idea it was to call the gas people in the first place and no one had asked her for the container and no one had asked her about her fever and headaches either, how she happened to be feeling these days, and this was the state of things.

She peered out the window and saw blue sky, a single square of it between buildings. One long surveillance helicopter circled. She went into the kitchen and picked up the container. Set it on the floor. She took hold of it by the long stick. Pushed down.