

Squat**by****Melissa Brown Levine**

She lived on the floor of my apartment for twenty-one days. Granted, it was out of the way, not even close to either of the two bedrooms. But the point is she was there. Uninvited. For twenty-one days.

I came home the evening after we broke up and she was set up in the area in front of the two large windows that was supposed to be the dining room, but it had remained empty because we never got around to buying a table and chairs. She'd said she was moving in with a girlfriend, but it looked like Loni had everything she and her brother moved out of the loft in the 15x5 space directly across from the kitchen. Her suitcases and boxes of shoes were stacked in the corner. A futon mattress served as her bed, couch, and desk. She was trying to make a point by keeping all of her things— books, laptop, television, radio, cell phone, nonperishable food stuffs, feminine hygiene gross junk— all within that recessed area.

She didn't even look up when I exited the elevator or when I tripped on my bottom lip trying to get closer.

“Loni, what are you doing here?”

Loni didn't answer or move any part of her body in my direction. She was propped up on the two over-stuffed pillows she had stolen when she left and her huge, sleepy, crescent eyes were focused on the little color T.V. between the tower of multicolored shoe boxes and the four large blue-gray suitcases. She was Hershey's Kisses

brown blending into one color from head to toe with the exceptions of the whites of her eyes, the pink of her bottom lip, and the ivory of her teeth. But I didn't see any of her teeth. She acted like I wasn't standing two feet away from her, anxiously sliding the soles of my snakeskin boots across the pine floor.

"Loni, what the hell are you doing?" Nothing. I turned around and dropped my briefcase, suit jacket, and keys on the kitchen bar. "Are you trying to make a point?" I asked when I walked back over and knelt beside her.

Her eyes remained fixed on the T.V. I searched for the source of her hypnotic state. *Rugrats*. I should have known. She'd hid her obsession from me the first year we lived together, then one night when we were getting ready for bed she popped the DVD in and got under the covers. She said it was how she came down after a stressful day. She had been watching the DVDs before I got home in the evenings, but she got tired of sneaking.

I was almost tickled, but quickly recouped when Loni laughed out loud. Her lips were full and thick. They took up a lot of room on her face and were usually glossy and slick because she stayed made-up until right before she stepped into bed. But on that day her face was bare, her lips dry and crusty, and her long hair pointed in several directions. The girl looked rough. And she was musty. She had on the pink flannel pajamas that I hated because they symbolized sexless nights for me. And she was covered with the four quilts I had torn the place up looking for the previous evening.

"Loni, you need to leave. We broke up last night. You're not supposed to be here." I was beginning to think she was having a breakdown because she kept laughing and acting like I was invisible. I was a little concerned. I'd never seen her that way

before. I was also a little pissed because and a lot annoyed. I had a date with Ms. Fourth Floor that I'd been looking forward to all day. Loni was going to have to snap out of it.

“Alright, you’ve got to get up now. It’s not a funny joke and you should really be embarrassed, ‘cause you look pretty bad.” I grabbed a corner of the blanket cocoon and pulled it back as I stood. “Get up, get your clothes on, and get your stuff out of here. And make sure you leave all of your keys this time.” I hadn’t demanded them before because I didn’t think I needed to. I was sure she was done with me after our fight. Loni and I wanted different things. I was cool with living together for a while longer, at least until I accomplished my career goals. But, Loni was ready for more. She said being engaged and living together for two years was long enough and I had to make a commitment to her or that was it.

She looked at me when I pulled the blankets down to her feet. Her long, reed-like fingers were laced and still in her lap. The pajamas were baggy on her. Loni had always been thin, but she’d told me during our fight that she’d lost twenty pounds in the last two months because of the stress of our relationship. I’d noticed that she’d become somewhat slight and seemed to have lost her appetite, but I thought it was deliberate, like maybe she’d thought losing weight would open my mind to marriage.

“Get up.” Her stare was steep and I felt myself falling. She was a beautiful mess. I bowed my head a little and put my hands in my pockets to fight off the seduction. Loni never tried to tempt me. Not when we met, not on our first date, not at any point when we were intimate. I always came to her. And always felt privileged when she accepted me.

I stepped back when I saw that she was moving. She stood and the weight loss was uncomfortably obvious, her smell poignant. It wasn’t offensive because I always

liked Loni sweaty. She tasted good salty with chocolate and whipped cream. Shit. I had to step back another foot because I was on my way to confessing and admitting to all kinds of wrongs so that I could have her again. We'd never got around to copulating on the kitchen counter. She had to go.

"I don't know what you were trying to prove by doing this. We finished last night. You decided to move out and I didn't expect to be coming home to you camped out on the floor. If there's a problem with you and your friend, whoever she is, I'm sure you have other people who will take you in while you get yourself together." She was motionless, her clothes hanging, eyes dropping, lips shut tight. "This was your idea, Loni. I was fine with things the way they were. You were the one who wanted it to change."

I was angry. Things between us had been fine, from my perspective. We had reached our third anniversary and I'd planned a romantic meal with surprises afterwards. Very expensive surprises that dangled from lady's earlobes, sparkled when they caught sunlight, and cost the equivalent of three Jaguar payments. Loni walked out of the restaurant before I could get to them. That wasn't really the bad part. Since she never knew about the earrings, I got my money back and bought a new toy: My Jag was delivered two days later.

At home, she said she was tired of being strung along and tired of being with a man who didn't want what she wanted. She didn't understand how she was supposed to feel secure in our relationship when I was allowing another year to cycle without making plans for our wedding. She wanted to know what would happen if she decided not to wait on me and went forward with the preparations. I told her it wouldn't be a good idea. I wasn't ready. She said that was the wrong answer.

I'd forgotten in less than twenty-four hours how tall Loni was. I'm over six feet and the top of her head came to my chin. I did remember the strong, well-defined body underneath all of that wool. She ran, lifted, took yoga and ballet classes. I was a little jealous because I'd gained about twenty pounds and my time in the gym had dwindled to maybe three times a week. But I felt good at one eighty-five. Good enough to get back in the game.

"I can help you with your stuff, but I've got somewhere to be in two hours, so, we need to get to it." Loni looked behind her. I thought she was making a decision about what needed to go first. Instead, she walked over to a crate crammed with toiletries and pulled out a new roll of toilet paper. Then she walked past me and into the guest bathroom. "You need to hurry up. I don't have time to play with you."

I walked to the back to the master bedroom after she closed the door. I didn't know what the game was or if she had really lost her mind, but she had to go. I wasn't going another round with her about our relationship and my failure to commit. She had to accept that things were what they were and neither one of us could change it. I pulled off my tie and unbuttoned my shirt, nearly ripping the buttons off as I wrestled with her in my head. When I bent over to retrieve my clothes from the floor after dropping my pants, I remembered I was a bachelor again. I walked away leaving them in a pile.

I went in the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I was still in pretty good shape, not cut-up like I used to be when I was playing ball and living in the gym, but I looked good. Loni always said I had the smoothest dark skin she'd ever seen on a brother. Yeah, Ms. Fourth Floor had commented about that, too. She liked the way I kept

my hair cut low and faded on the sides and in the back. She was into me strong. I just had to remember her name before I went up for our date.

I took a leak then pulled a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt out of the dresser. With Loni's stuff gone I was able to pull my casual clothes off the closet shelves and bring them back into the bedroom. I had room to move around again. That was another advantage of being single.

When I came out of my room I noticed the hall bathroom door was open. I walked to the kitchen and Loni was back in the position I'd found her in, like she'd never moved.

"What are you doing? I told you to get out. Put some clothes on, get your shit, and go." She didn't move and I wasn't sure what she was trying to get me to do. I'd been in a situation with a woman before who was crazy and became violent when I tried to physically put her out. She left after giving me a gift that was an inch deep and two inches long on the top of my right thigh. I rubbed the scar through the cotton as I watched Loni, who was once again oblivious to my presence. "You know what, Loni, I'm not gonna play games with you. I told you to get out and you won't leave, so I'm calling the police."

I walked back into my room to dial 911 hoping she would take the opportunity to see her way out. It took ten minutes to convince the operator that I felt threatened and I wanted Loni arrested for trespassing. I heard the woman laugh when she told me to hold on, then mumbling from a second and third party. The dispatcher cleared her throat and came back on the line. Police would arrive in less than ten minutes. I thanked her and caught the tale end of her laugh before she disconnected. I didn't hear any movement when I stood in the bedroom doorway. I decided to stay where I was until the police

buzzed. My Midtown address was at least good for a speedy response from them. I paid enough to expect at least that courtesy.

I started pacing and ended up walking back down the hall. She was in the same position. No, actually, she'd moved her left foot three inches to the right.

"You're kidding me with this, right? What could you possibly have to gain? Do you want the apartment? Is that what this is? We talked about that. You said it was too much for you..." The buzz. Finally. I went to the intercom by the elevator. "Yes."

"Mr. Mims? Jake Mims?"

"Yeah, that's me. Is this the police?"

"Yes, sir. You're having a domestic problem?"

"Yes, I am. Come on up." I looked at Loni. "You brought it to this." I heard the elevator and turned back to see one of two officers lifting the door.

"Mr. Mims, I'm Officer Wayne and this is my partner Officer Brooks." He looked cautiously around the living room and towards the kitchen before coming into the apartment. "Dispatch said you had a unique domestic situation on your hands."

His left cheek rose slightly and his partner looked around at the room. I was sure they'd joked the whole eight minutes it took them to respond. The spokesman, Officer Wayne, was about an inch taller than me and heavily built. Officer Brooks was exactly my height, a little lighter than his partner. They were both pale and I could feel the cold they brought in with them. December was a pretty bad month to break up with somebody but, shit, it was what she wanted.

"Yeah, I'm having a problem getting my ex-girlfriend to leave." I stepped back and turned my head in Loni's direction. The officers moved forward. "We broke up last

night and she moved out. When I got home today that's where I found her and all her stuff. She won't talk to me. She's looked at me one time since I've been here. She went to the bathroom and I went to change clothes thinking she was ready for me to help her move out again, but she was back in the same spot when I came out. I told the operator I wanted to press charges for trespassing, but if you could just escort her out, and I'll make arrangements to get her things to her, that would be fine."

"What's her name?" Officer Wayne asked as he passed me.

"Loni Edison."

Officer Wayne knelt down to talk to Loni and I noticed her face had changed. She didn't look dejected and nearly insane as she had when I came home. I heard her speak for the first time that day as she answered Officer Wayne's questions. Her words were unhurried. I got so caught up in the flow of her husky vibrato I didn't hear what she told him.

"Did either one of you get violent?" Officer Brooks stared at me as if he could find the answer to his question in the way my t-shirt hung or how my eyes rolled when I brought my attention back to him.

"No, neither one of us was violent. She hasn't said a word to me. And I haven't touched her."

"So, why did you two break up? Did you give her one too many love taps?"

I saw my mistake in Officer Brooks searching green eyes. It was all going to turn around on me. And I could tell from the innocence oozing from Loni's throaty whisper over the legal sized sheet of paper she'd suddenly produced and was reviewing with Officer Wayne, she knew it too. She'd set me up.

“It’s okay, Ms. Edison, we’ll straighten him out.” The tall, hulky officer walked towards me and motioned to the elevator with a cock of his blond head. I followed him and Officer Brooks followed me after telling Loni to have a good evening.

I pulled the elevator door down and faced the officers on our descent. I wanted to dispute whatever it was she’d said but I didn’t want to contribute to any form of police brutality they were telepathically choreographing between them.

“OK, Mr. Mims, the way Ms. Edison explains the situation is that the two of you live here together as a couple. Her name is on the lease, she showed me that.” He licked his index finger and flipped through a note pad I didn’t recall seeing or being aware that he was writing on during his interview. “And according to her you two just had a disagreement because you’re not ready to commit and as an act of defiance she decided to camp out in the front of the apartment and she plans on being there until you all come to an agreement or you apologize for being a jerk.”

He laughed openly with his partner who had been shaking his head as he listened intently. I couldn’t close my mouth. Loni had played them real smooth. She knew exactly what she was doing. There was no way they were going to put her out.

“I’m just jokin’ with you buddy, I threw in that last part. She didn’t say that. But, uh, maybe you should take a clue from her and just go in the back and stay out of her way or go sleep at a friend’s house, you know, anything to keep down the confusion. She seems like a real nice lady and, shit, you’re actually lucky. If it were my old lady all my stuff would be piled up in the front yard and my key wouldn’t fit the lock.”

Both officers found that entertaining. We got to the bottom level and I absently lifted the door and stepped to the side so the officers could exit.

“Just stay cool, man. It’ll be over in the morning. She’ll be ready to get off that futon after tonight.”

“Yes, Sir.” My brain was twisting around the meaning of what Loni had obviously planned. “I appreciate you coming out.”

“No problem, glad it wasn’t anything bad.”

Officer Wayne turned and walked through the lobby to the entrance. His partner hovered, looking first at his shuffling feet then lifting his eyes and upturned lips in my direction. “You need to go on and marry that girl. It’ll make her happy, keep you out of trouble, and keep us from having to make return visits out here.”

We made eye contact and although I was certain part of his advice was weighted in a joke he would continue with his partner on their ride back to the station, something told me he was sincerely trying to help. I wondered how many men he’d seen brought down by a trickster like the one I had upstairs. I nodded to let him know I’d heard him.

“You have a good evening, Mr. Mims.”

“You too. And thanks.”

SO, I was at war. It was clear to me on the ride back up that I had to handle Loni in a manner I’d never thought to. With other women it had been easy for me to take them through changes, even borderline mental abuse. But Loni was so smart and beautiful and spilling over with dreams, I recognized she was special and I had every intention of marrying her— someday. But after this stunt she fell to the bottom of the, “Just Something to Do,” category and I forced back my love for her. She’d made me look like a fool. That was not acceptable.

I retaliated. Every morning I got up forty minutes early so I could wake her. I would start in the kitchen, cooking all the things I used to serve her in bed on Sunday mornings: bacon, grits, biscuits, scrambled eggs with onion and bell pepper, and coffee. The whole place would smell delicious and I'd see her roll over from the corner of my eye. I'd make just enough for one and position myself at the bar where she could watch me consume every bite. When she started jumping up and running to the bathroom when I sat down to eat, I took to standing next to the door with my plate, chewing with my mouth open, and scraping the porcelain. I knew it was killing her, but she continued with her mute act and didn't even pretend she was moving out.

The next thing was the stare. I picked up the pace of consuming my breakfast then spent fifteen minutes every morning sitting approximately two inches away from the back of her head, using my eyes as laser beams boring through her matted hair and granite skull to the squashy core of gray matter that was directing her insanity. It became very much like meditation for me. I enjoyed it even though she would fall asleep or pretend to, with the snoring and slobbering and all kinds of sounds I'd never heard from her during the two years we lived together. Because I found the practice so fulfilling, I incorporated it into my evening activities as well.

I could always tell that she moved around the house when I was gone. A pot I hadn't used that morning would be in the drainer next to the sink. The hall bathroom would smell of lemon pine something, and her area would be clean and tidy. She would have on clean pajamas even though the mustiness inevitably surfaced from her frail body being smothered by the weight of the blankets. I noticed her cell phone would be lying on

her stomach when I got home. Since she was, apparently, missing adult conversation, I decided to talk to her.

I discussed our break up at length while she pretended to focus on the animated characters racing across the small screen. I told her everything I hated about her: the way she wore her hair, the crackling of her voice when she woke up in the morning, the way she chomped her fingernails at the dinner table—at home or in public. I told her that I always thought she was actually funny looking and entirely too skinny, but she'd seemed so needy when we meet I knew it would be easy to get her in bed.

Loni began to buzz, getting up often to move around her space, pick through her things, and go back and forth to the bathroom with me right behind her yelling anything stupid I could come up with through the closed door. I got to the point where I was cursing her, calling her a bitch. A whore. Telling her to get the fuck out of my house. She answered by taping the lease to the wall and highlighting her signature.

She did other things in response to my tyranny. Like flossing. Loni must have gone through a roll of floss a day. She pulled it out every time I took my seat on the floor next to her. The only problem I ever really had with Loni was her flossing. She would do it in bed every night and leave the chewed up string on her nightstand. As a squatter she left them on the floor in front of my crossed legs. During my taunts she'd floss the bottom row, deposit the string on the floor, and then pull out more flows from the dispenser to go at the top row. She would continue the floss-floor motion as long as I talked. I had decided I was man enough to handle it. I desensitized myself by staring at each piece of shredded saliva soaked, blood-tinged string for twenty seconds every time one escaped her mouth.

We carried on like that for a few more days then she added her own twist to the game. Loni started walking around naked: From the bathroom to her pallet and back. From the time I got home at 4:30 until I went to bed at eleven or twelve or one. It just depended on how badly I wanted to see her. She was gaining weight, I thought, because she was sedentary. But when she started doing yoga postures in the raw every damn evening, I realized that wasn't the case. She seemed content and happy while I was being assaulted by rage from the inside: my skin was breaking out, a patch of hair on the top of my head was thinning, I had migraines, and I was almost sure I was developing an ulcer. My social life was non-existent because I ran home every evening with a new trick I'd thought up to snuff her out. Ms. Fourth Floor had stopped speaking to me after I stood her up. I was miserable and Loni was happy. I was falling apart and she was thriving. She hadn't said a word to me, but at that point she would smile big every time I came into the room, showing all of her tarter free teeth.

One night while I was on the floor she stood up, turned her radio on, and literally shook her naked ass in my face. Something I had begged her to do repeatedly and she'd refused every time because she said it was degrading. I was up and had my hands on her shoulders, pushing her to the floor before I knew it. "Get the fuck out of my goddamn house, bitch!"

She was dressed before Officer Wayne and Officer Brooks came. They had another talk with me. Told me to leave and not to return until I'd cooled off. If they had to come out again they would arrest me for something. Being stupid. Being a jerk. They'd make up a charge. Officer Brooks repeated his advice and shook his bowed head as he

followed his partner out the door. It wasn't humorous to them this time. They could see something bad coming.

I DECIDED to change my strategy. I wouldn't go after Loni directly anymore. I checked into a hotel for two days, got some sleep, got cleaned up. I bought new clothes, cologne. I called up friends I'd been neglecting and went to a few clubs. The night I came home, I wasn't alone. I told the woman and the others on the following nights, that Loni was my bohemian cousin crashing with me for a few days. She was on a spiritual quest and didn't believe in sleeping in beds or looking or smelling good. None of them cared. They were all too drunk or high. But one did want Loni to join us. I told her it was a good idea and I would be down for it, but it was just that she was my cousin and it would be too freaky. "I'll just have to do the work of two women then." Man, did she ever.

The closest I got to a threesome was having sex with one woman on the counter in the kitchen. Loni kept her back turned, but I could feel the steam pouring out of her body. I just knew she would be gone when I woke up in the morning. But that wasn't the case. What I woke up to was the rough, creak of Loni's voice and the vaguely familiar piercing squeak of the exhibitionist I'd brought home. I pulled on some boxers, walked down the hall, and found the two of them on the futon, involved in deep conversation over coffee. They ignored me as a unit, which was fine because—what was I going to say?

I realized how low I'd sunk as I walked back to my room and called in sick. I started thinking about the reasons I hadn't made a commitment to Loni. Why I had strung her along. I didn't have a firm answer.

“You’re scared.” The show queen from the kitchen counter yelled as she entered the room. She had on a black bra and a pair of my pajama bottoms. I wasn’t sure how she thought it was okay for her to wear my clothes. “She’s great and you’re a punk.” She removed the pants and threw them on the floor then pulled her little black dress over her curly mess of black hair, her overstuffed bra, down her thick waist and over her bare, ashy ass. The fabric stopped about three inches from the top of her thighs.

She went into the bathroom and I heard water then a brush over teeth. I was too repulsed to even attempt to stop her. When she came out I saw that she wasn’t cute and definitely not a woman I would choose to be with sober. She didn’t say anything else, but her glare roared, “Jerk”. She exited and I heard mumbling then the lifting of the elevator door. The little T.V. broadcasted the morning news.

It wasn’t money. Loni made more than I did working as a loan officer out of the house. And she’d continued working during whatever it was we were going through. I saw evidence of that. My job as a project manager required travel, but that wasn’t a reason to hold off on marriage, either. All of my bosses and most of the people I recruited were married with three or four kids. And I was shooting to the top of the ladder with ease.

I’d made jokes at meetings and at dinner parties with Loni present about how staying engaged would keep us together for years while marriage would destroy us on contact. I saw her flat expression when everyone laughed. I thought she’d grown tired of hearing the joke the same way she often became annoyed when I tried to tease her out of a bad mood.

I got up, put my robe on and walked toward the sound of Matt and Katie messing with Al about something. Loni was in position, propped up on the two pillows, and covered from the neck down with the blankets. I sat down on the floor, stared at the cooking session on the screen then my hands.

“I’m sorry, Loni.” I couldn’t look at her, but I felt her eyes on me. “This whole thing has been a mess. I acted like I didn’t care when you ended it, but I did. I was just too proud to try and stop you. I’m really sorry I hurt you and I’m sorry my being an asshole ‘caused us to lose what we had.”

When I finally found the strength to lift my head she was sitting up. Smiling. “That’s all I wanted.” Loni stood. She was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. I hadn’t noticed that her hair was combed and her face flawlessly made up. “I’ll be back later for my things and I’ll leave the keys downstairs.”

I watched her collect her purse and phone, the bag with her laptop and her leather jacket. She walked to the elevator and looked back at me after lifting the door.

“My friend says you were a weak lay.”

About the author

Melissa Brown Levine has published novels, contributed to magazines, and reviewed books for several years. Levine's primary writing focus is women's fiction. She explores the lives of women by creating dynamic characters who are open, vulnerable, and eager to grow.

Read more of Melissa Brown Levine’s work at www.melissabrownlevine.com

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