

First Prize is “No Bags” by J. Cade Keith!
Seventh Annual Drapers Guild Short Story

What the judge said:

“No Bags” by J. Cade Keith is a beautiful little story. After all, when it comes to short fiction, Chekhov is God — yes? “No Bags” is a sketch worthy of the master. (The fact that coincidentally its title could have been “The Lady with the Dog” did not enter into my evaluation.)

On top of that, J. Cade Keith, in a few words set off by em-dashes, twice explicitly and deftly places the story squarely within the parameters set for the contest. Bravo!

NO BAGS

J. Cade Keith

Late night, soft, fat, slow falling snow softens the city. No one is out. A bus hums by below.

Across Harlan Street, a couple—I am assuming they are a couple—sit alone in their loft on a mousey gray sofa staring at a small dog on the other side of the room by the radiator. The dog pretends to be asleep, or, at least, that’s how I see it in my mind’s eye. I decide that they are wondering if they have made the right decision.

‘A Chihuahua Rat Terrier? Really? This is really the best we can do?’

The dog cocks a wary eye and watches them talk.

‘It’s what he wanted. You saw the look on his face.’

‘Don’t. You’d already been over there and picked it out.’

‘You signed on.’

‘You shanghaied me.’

‘You could have come with us anytime.’

‘No, I couldn’t. You two never said a word about it to me.’

‘Sure, we did.’

‘Well, you’re going to be the one who walks it.’

Romi—I’m calling her Romi—hates yoga, she prays to a non-existent god that her eleven year old son, Tank, will grow up to become a hedge fund manager and refuses to carry around dog shit in one of those little purple bags.

Twice a week. That’s how many times, on average, Romi gets asked when she will finally come to yoga.

‘When are you going to come with me to yoga?’ her sister asks.

‘When are you going to come with us to yoga?’ her best friend asks.

Then she has to remind them both how she feels about wearing yoga pants and sports bras. The bit about the hedge fund manager is a thing she likes to tell some of the other moms just to mess with them. And, anyway, who doesn’t want a billionaire in the family?

Romi’s absolute resolve on the doggie poop issue is hardwired.

Sure, owning a dog in suburbia comes with a degree of civic responsibility. You can’t let them chase cars or run around and bite people, for two examples. She understands that. But strolling around with a pooper-scooper is not the way Romi grew up. She had a dog when she was a girl, a black dachshund. Cinderella—Cinders for short. She loved that dog. She fed her and played with her and welcomed her into her bed, but as far as picking up her poop, there was none of that. If you happened to step in some, well, that was on you. No way Romi was going to stoop over and scoop up dog excrement. When the aliens look down and see people walking along behind a bunch of four-legged creatures carrying squishy bags of waste, they’ll think the animals are in charge. The dog shit will decompose. Romi doesn’t believe all the talk about eco-friendly bags. Plastic lives forever. Whenever Romi gets stuck with having to walk the family pet, she does it after dark.

Once she got caught in an alley by a man taking out his recycling. Futile.

‘Hey! Hey you!’ the man called after her. ‘Aren’t you going to pick that up?’

Romi turned and held up her palm helplessly.

‘Sorry. No bags,’ Romi lied. She hid the little plastic dispenser hanging from the leash behind her back.

‘You still need to pick that up.’

Romi kept walking backwards, letting the dog pull her along.

'It's just an alley.' She smiled.

'No you don't!' the man growled. 'This is *my* alley. You're not goin' anywhere until you pick up that mess!'

'No bags,' Romi shrugged.

The man punched around in his recycling bin and pulled out a Walmart bag.

'Here!' he said, striding towards Romi and thrusting the bag under her nose. 'Use this.'

The bag was big and unwieldy, but the man was big and mad. Romi picked up the poop.

'All right, then!' Romi said, brightly. 'Thanks for your help.'

When the man disappeared back into his garage and she was sure he was gone, Romi twirled the bag over her head three times and let it fly.

Nope. No way. No fucking way.

'You're right about one thing. Do we have to call her Missy? It's such a wussy name.'

Romi eyes the dog with distaste.

'That's on you. Wussy name for a wussy dog. You said he could pick one out and that he could name it.'

'You think we made the wrong decision?'

'You have to live with that. I'm still not walking the damn dog.'