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Fallible

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Fallible

Bob De Smith

She often left a grocery bag
At the bottom of the stairs.
He could read the sign:
There was one more than she
Could carry up to the flat.
He grabbed it—
Without thinking or thoughtfully,
No matter,
After unlacing his boots
And hanging his garage sweatshirt
In the hallway beneath the stairs.
On this day, he fumbled the bag,
Odd for a sure-handed
Mechanic.
Perhaps he was tired, or eager,
Or his mind was full—
Or the routine failed him.
The bag glanced off the edge
Of a tread—
The metal molding over linoleum.
And, inside, a bottle broke.
Alert to noise,
He leaned in—
And slumped to his knees.
The bottle was ammonia,
And he had taken a good whiff.
Upstairs, we heard the glass shatter,
Then the heavy crumple.
We caught sight of him
In a high angle shot
From atop the straight run.
By then he was wandering about on his knees,
Shaking his head clear.

He glanced up and saw two boys,
Smiled crookedly, and said,
“Guess I got too much of your mother’s ammonia.
Bring me a broom and some rags.”
We scooted.
When the mess was cleaned,
Heavy stringent scent in the air,
Dad was still shaking his head—
Not so much to “clear the cobwebs,”—
His words—
But at the comedy
Of his strength sapped.
“Wow,” we marveled,
Whether at the power
Of ammonia or
At the sudden weakness
Of a man,
I do not know.