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Suddenly Tired

John Kuharik

“The money I’m making now, we shouldn’t be eating casseroles.”

Helen Jenkins regarded her husband across the table. Watched as he forked cheesy tuna casserole into his mouth and thumbed a TV Guide. Dark blue shirt, shaved head, he wore a tie that might as well have said, “Let’s do business.” She noticed he rarely used her name any more. No Helen this, nor Helen that. As if instead of speaking to her personally, he’d come to prefer making general announcements.

“Get some steaks and shrimp.”

“I thought we were in a crisis, Lane. You know, what you said about gas going up?”

“We’re OK now.”

Lane sold insurance. We’re OK now, she’d learned, could mean anything from a commission check cashed an hour ago, to a daydream about a meeting with a promising client at the end of the month. Her part-time check from Borders, an attempt to help them through the current casserole period, had earned a snort from Lane the first time he’d seen it.

Helen finished eating in silence.

Later, she set things into the dishwasher as usual, kneed the door shut, and turned to the sink to finish what needed doing by hand. She began washing the four-quart, Corningware casserole dish, sticky with cheesy tuna, but suddenly she felt overwhelming tired. She glanced at Lane plopped on the couch watching Seinfeld re-runs. She thought of their days in New York when they didn’t have a TV because they didn’t want to waste the time. Lane would come home and pin her to that couch for a good hour.

She pushed a stray hair from her eye with the back of her wrist.

Maybe she wouldn’t need this Corningware anymore. She opened the door beneath the sink with a soapy hand and eased the heavy dish into the trash can. It had been a Crate and Barrel wedding present eight years ago from Lane’s favorite cousin Ed, a single guy who had lived only a few blocks from them in New York. Helen smiled. Ed liked to give out nick names, and her’s had been Stringbean. He’d come to visit them in Naperville once, but only sent Christmas cards now. Nice cards though, from the New York Art Museum.

A few evenings later, Helen straightened up from the dishwasher and leaned her slim frame against the counter. She cocked her head at a baking pan lined with remnants of gooey blackberry cobbler as another wave of fatigue hit her.

She looked at Lane on the couch. With hardly a thought, one wet hand opened the under-sink door, and the other plopped the gooey pan into the trash. Another Crate and Barrel item mailed to her mother's house before the wedding. This from Kathy Smith, a teacher friend from New York who never called anymore either. Kathy's Christmas cards were always tasteful Hallmark selections.

Over the next three weeks, a sixteen ounce Pyrex measuring cup, sticky with egg whites, an Apilco gravy boat, made in France, but encrusted with low-fat chicken gravy, and a Circulon twelve-inch no-stick frying pan with burnt residue, all presented themselves to Helen at her most fatigued, wet handed, after dinner moment. Each thumped into the trash under cover of laughing Seinfelds.

The Pyrex cup—one item not from Crate and Barrel—had been from Lane's sister Paula. The gravy boat, a specimen piece, which to Helen meant it didn't match anything, from Cindy Baker, in Lane's office. Helen later suspected her and Lane of fooling around. No evidence, really. Just a feeling. The frying pan was from Bill and Heather Jacobs, college friends of Lane's.

No Christmas cards ever from Paula, or Cindy Baker. Bill and Heather—who lived in Connecticut now—sent cards featuring ink sketches of bucolic New England, usually farmhouses with wreaths on their doors. Once at a party in New York, Bill tried to hit on Helen. Told her he loved the way her hair always looked wet. Since that was the look she was after at the time, she'd allowed herself to flirt with him a bit.

It took some doing, that hair. Way more energy than her current ponytail. A week after the frying pan, the first small appliance disappeared. A fourteen speed Hamilton Beach blender that Lane had mixed Daiquiris in and left unwashed near the sink got snatched up faster than a limping antelope at a waterhole. A wedding gift from his Aunt Marla, and her husband, whoever. Their Christmas cards had come for three years, then nothing.

In the following days Helen felt giddy and a little out of control. Items selected for discard no longer needed to be cheesy, gooey, or encrusted. Mixing bowls collecting dust on a shelf, spatulas hiding in a drawer, and an electric knife waiting for the next turkey to appear, were not spared. If something looked tiring to Helen, it was adios amigo.

"Heavy garbage can this morning," said Lane at dinner one Friday, well into the second month of the diaspora.

"You're strong, I'm sure you handled it."

"Hmm," said Lane, squinting at the TV Guide next to his plate. "Sex and the City is the only thing we haven't seen tonight."

Now, that killed Helen. It told her Lane was still interested in sex on some

level. Just no level she was on, apparently.

“How do you like the rice?” she asked. The rice steamer had gone under the sink Tuesday.

“Seems a little sticky.”

“Let me ask you something, Lane.” Helen pulled her fork from between her lips and held it up in front of her face. “Do you remember where we got this silverware?”

Lane looked up. “Is this real silver?”

Typical answer, she thought. After their wedding, when she was ooh, and aah over the gifts; he was, where are the checks?

“It’s stainless. I just call it silverware. The question is: do you know where it’s from?”

Lane frowned. “I know we had it in New York.” Helen chewed her rice.

“Do you know?” he asked.

Helen nodded and smiled. “Your mother, for our wedding.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

Their eyes met for a moment and Lane looked like he was about to say something. But he gave a small shrug instead, and then looked down at his plate and resumed eating. Helen twirled the fork in her fingers and watched him. When would he figure this out, she wondered? The next time he wanted a Daiquiri? Her turn to shrug.

No matter.

As she set her fork down, her mind drifted to the front closet. There, her slightly bulging, black carry-on suitcase stood quietly on its wheels, a New York City Subway map tucked neatly under a flap. Pull-handle fully extended, it was ready to roll.