Maggie woke up to the stop and start of a car outside her bedroom window. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked over Jim's wiry body to the box-shaped alarm clock on her nightstand. Eight-thirty. On a Saturday morning. Why don’t they just call a tow truck already? Jim was sound asleep, a fat grin pasted across his face. Lucky bastard. She’d told herself she would leave him today. Not like the last time when she hurried back because she forgot her one pair of Prada shoes, or like the time before when all the motels within a twenty-mile radius were booked and she was running low on gas, but once and for all. For good. She slumped back under the covers and pulled the pillow over her head.

A second glance at the clock revealed that it was noon. She couldn’t remember sleeping. In fact, she was sure she had broken up with Jim during breakfast, but he was still slumbering next to her, half-naked with his three golden chest hairs curling between his pecks.

She touched his freckled arm but he didn’t stir. In the three months since they’d been married and sharing her one-bedroom apartment on the noisiest street in Davis, he’d slept through everything: roaring engines, squeaky bicycles, automatic sprinkler systems. Another car outside backfired; it sounded like a firecracker exploding in her head. But Jim was still, tucked into a fetal position with his chin resting on his small fists. She threw the covers off, slid out of bed, and trudged off to the bathroom. Well, she had things to do: Her
dissertation on the migration of rice plants from China to the
Caribbean to finish. And tomorrow she was scheduled to present her
paper, "Transporting the Patty: The Proliferation of Basmati Rice," at
the In Search of Environmental History Conference. She pulled her
Wonder Woman T-shirt over her head and slipped off her underwear.
No one had to tell her she was the rising star of the UC Davis history
department. Left hand on her hip, she turned on the shower. And
rising stars just don’t get a lot of sleep. She stepped inside the tub.
And they don’t marry pretty-boy, bartending, wannabe poets on a
whim in Vegas either. She ran her nail-bitten fingers through her hair
and let the stream of water pound on her head.

She heard the door slam. Jim must have retrieved the paper from
the front porch. After breakfast she’d tell him that despite the pair of
fours she’d rolled for him on the craps table, he didn’t really owe her
anything—maybe just half of the ten grand she’d won him. She
squirited some shampoo into her palm and scrubbed it into her
cropped mousy hair. And she’d like to keep the Gucci wedding dress
they’d bought with the winnings, too.

Jim was standing over the stove with one hand on his tight waist
when she emerged from the bathroom with a bleach-stained blue
towel wrapped around her head. He gripped an iron skillet and held it
two inches above the flame of the gas burner. He gave the green
onion and anchovy omelet one last flip before setting the skillet back
down. Green onions and anchovies. Every morning. The fishy smell
permeated the apartment; it was on her sneakers, on her afghan, she
could even smell it on her Miro print. She poured herself a bowl of
cornflakes and sat down at the table with a spoon and a carton of
soy milk. Jim sprinkled a last dash of chili pepper and transferred the omelet to the plate that waited on the counter. He joined her at the table with a large beer mug filled with black coffee.

"Wanna bite?" He held up a yellow green glob of egg-covered anchovy on his fork.

"No, I don’t think so," she said.

He spooned the glob into his mouth, showing her all his anchovy-covered teeth. If only the line at the Paris Hotel buffet had been shorter, she might have never even met him.

"Are you ready for your conference?" Hand around his fork, he folded another quarter of the omelet in half, and shoved it into his mouth. Now they were Mr. and Mrs. James A. Huckster, all because she was good with the dice and he was, well, she wasn’t sure what he was. And there was also that bottle of José Cuervo. She swore she’d never drink a drop of tequila again.

"Anything I can do to help?" he asked, showing more of the omelet into his mouth, like Cookie Monster with a sudden salty egg craving.

She sunk her cornflakes into the milk with her spoon. "No, thanks."

"You know, I’m working on a new poem. Can I read it to you?"
He got up and pulled a piece of loose-leaf paper off the counter.

She put her spoon down and wondered if there was a way to close her ears. She’d heard on the Discovery channel about an African lizard that could that.

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“In the sky, I see the moon.
And when I see the moon,
I think of spoons.
Spoons and eating ice cream.
With chocolate and marshmallows.
Marshmallows my mother never gave me.
She never gave me sprinkles either.
My mother was a shitty mother.”

He sat back down at the table and folded his hands in front of him. “What do you think?” He gripped the piece of paper like a schoolboy in front of his class.

“It’s better. Definitely much better.” She took a long sip of her soymilk and tried to pretend it was brandy.

Breakfast ended. Jim went out to change the oil in the Hyundai from Hell, leaving her sitting at their wood-like kitchen table with her soymilk, mushy cornflakes, and half-cocked divorce speech milling around her mouth. She got up and went to her computer; she’d promised her thesis advisor that she’d have chapter twenty-three, “The decline of basmati in the advent of sugar cane plantations,” finished by Monday. She sifted through her typewritten notes and color-coded economic charts. After dinner, she thought. After dinner was still, technically, today. She settled herself into her pleather chair and began to type.

Several hours later, Jim interrupted her mid-sentence with a plate of veggie lasagna.

“I rented a movie, in case you want to take a break.” He handed
her a fork and a napkin, and a glass of water. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.” He kissed her on the forehead; his cheek felt like the back of a spoon and she could smell the tangy sweetness of his aftershave. He left and shut the door behind him. She examined the lasagna; the noodles were uneven in width, homemade.

Pieces of dark green spinach spilled from the sides of the plate. She took a bite and the noodles just slid down the back of her throat. She grabbed the plate and joined Jim in the living room.

“Good?” He slid over on their gray couch, his one contribution of furniture, to make room for her.

“Yeah, it’s great.” She took another bite. The vegetables were crunchy and the tomatoes tasted like the sun; there was a happy organic circus tumbling around her mouth. “So what did you rent?” she asked, knowing full well that chapter twenty-three was still a convoluted mess and she had no idea what she was going to say in chapter twenty-four.

“Hang on a sec,” she said. She went to her office and grabbed her draft and a pen. She could work while she watched the movie. And what was one more night for old time’s sake?

***

Jim fumbled with the radio buttons, classic rock to country and then back to classic rock, as he maneuvered through traffic on the way to Berkeley. Why couldn’t he just choose a lane and slow down? She needed to review her note cards. She went back to number one: basmati rice and its historical role as a catalyst of cultural amalgamation. She should have left him last night. She should have packed up the Hyundai from Hell and gone to stay with Sylvia and her cats, home-
made lasagna or no homemade lasagna. How could she let herself be bought so easily? She was a food mercenary – and a cheap one at that.

They arrived at the conference fifteen minutes early. She meandered through the participants and took notes, memorizing names and contacts. Dr. David Schuamby from the University of Colorado. Leslie Evans of Duke. Stuart Henderson, the head of Yale’s ecology department. She put a little red star next to that one. At one-thirty sharp, she read her paper to an audience of fifty-one and she counted at least thirty nods of approval from distinguished looking people, some probably heads of departments.

But the question-and-answer session turned into a feeding frenzy when Mark Morgan, NeoMarxist labor historian extraordinaire and her long-time rival for department superstar, challenged her research. He stood up, adjusted his tie, and quoted Antonio Gramsci, arguing that Western World hegemony had somehow forced the people of the Third World to eat rice instead of steak. What did her work have to do with some Italian communist? She tried to explain that her research focused on the symbiotic relationship between the environment and culture and not the power struggles of the proletariat, but no one seemed to be listening to her. They were all listening to him, jotting down his name on the back of their programs with black felt pens. She felt her face turn into a giant tomato – like the ones Jim was always bringing home from the Farmer’s Market. No one was going to offer her a tenure track position or a research fellowship. She’d be lucky to land a job at a community college in North Dakota. Then Jim stood up. He’d been sitting in the back of the room the whole time with his sandal-clad feet resting on a chair. He cleared his
throat; the audience members snapped their heads around to stare at him. Maggie held her breath.

“Actually, what I think she’s trying to say is that rice was not some bourgeois instrument of oppression.” Jim tucked his T-shirt into his shorts and brushed his hair away from his face. “Rice empowered people by giving them a means of communicating across cultures. It allowed them to come together.” He cleared his throat once again.

“And when people come together, that’s when they have power. Isn’t that what Lenin argued? John and the Russian guy.” Jim looked Mark straight in the eye, then he winked at Maggie and sat back down.

“You have a good point there,” said Stuart Henderson of Yale.

“Professor Huckster,” he stood up and turned towards Maggie, “I think you’ve done some very good work here.” Then he sat back down and scribbled a note next to her name in the program. Maggie let out her breath, knowing full well that she hadn’t made any kind of point at all. She had watched some insipid Meg Ryan flick and eaten two helpings of homemade lasagna.

After everyone left the room, Maggie gathered up her notes and followed Jim out to the car. He opened the door for her. She adjusted her seatbelt. Then he closed her door and got in himself.

“How did you know what to say?” she asked. She examined his face for some kind of clue, but he just looked like Jim. Maybe he’d been possessed by pod people or something.

“You leave drafts of your paper lying all around the apartment.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small yellow notepad. “How could I not know what to say?”

He’d read her dissertation. He’d voluntarily read her dissertation.
She'd never voluntarily read someone's dissertation – especially when it was all about rice.

"I was inspired by your talk so I wrote another poem." Jim flipped through the pages. "Wanna hear?"

She nodded her head.

"Rice is a necessary substance.
An essential substance.
They eat it in China.
They eat it in Japan.
Rice doesn't come in a can.
So I never ate rice.
Cause my mom only fed us stuff from cans.
Like Spam.
I had a shitty mother."

He flipped back the pages in his pad and returned it to his pocket. "I know it's a little low on imagery." He put the key in the ignition. "But it's only a first draft."

"I don't know what to say." She looked down at her notes and put her pencil in her mouth. The Twilight Zone. She must be on an episode of The Twilight Zone, or on Candid Camera, and she'd never been married at all. It was all one big hoax, and now she could leave it all behind and focus on her rice and the convoluted mess that was chapter twenty-three.

"But do you like it?" He gripped the steering wheel. Little beads of sweat popped up on his knuckles.
She uttered something that sounded affirmative.

He backed out of the parking space. “Thanks. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He pulled her head towards him and smacked her a kiss on the lips, then he turned out of the parking lot. Where was her resolve? Where was her ambition? Her career was halfway down the drain. She rolled down the window and touched the center of her back trying to figure out what had happened to her spine.

***

Jim made pesto pizza for dinner with the basil he was growing outside their kitchen window. He had baked the crust, from scratch. She asked him once how he’d learned to cook.

“I apprenticed as a chef at an Italian place while I was at Texas A&M,” he answered.

“But I thought you were a lit major?” she asked. She unfolded her arms and tried not to look too accusatory.

“Where’d you get that idea?” He laughed and stirred the marinara sauce he was cooking on the stove. “Econ. Didn’t I tell you that?”

No, he hadn’t told her that. He hadn’t told her a lot of things. She didn’t know what his favorite color was, although it seemed to be green, and she didn’t know if he was allergic to anything – like shellfish, or oranges. These things were important to know.

“Not that I know of,” he had answered, “I can pretty much eat anything.” Then he dipped his index finger in the sauce and held his hand up for her to have a taste.

***

Jim pulled the pizza from the oven with a kitchen towel and placed it on the counter. He cut it into slices and served them both a piece.
She sat at their two-seat kitchen table and watched how he served her. He always made sure that her fork and a knife were placed properly on either side of her plate, and he always gave her a full glass of water and two napkins.

When he finished serving the pizza, he sat down across from her. He was hot from the oven and had removed his shirt. His three golden chest hairs were plastered with sweat against his chest.

“So how come you never talk about your family?” he asked. He folded a slice of pizza in half and bit off a large chunk. Olive oil dripped in a thin yellow-green stream from the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t know. There’s not much to tell.” She cut a piece of pizza with her knife and fork. As far as she knew, her family was still in Tennessee watching TV. Her father was probably drinking a root beer; her mother was probably yelling at him to pick a channel already. She pulled her hair back behind her ears. She had to tell Jim. She had to tell him now. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“Again?” He grabbed a paper napkin and wiped off his chin.

She took a deep breath, inhaling wafts of mushrooms and green peppers in the process. “I don’t think this is working.” She put her utensils down. Be strong, she thought, and straightened her posture.

“Of course you don’t. You’re one of those people.” He bit off another chunk of pizza. This time he picked up his napkin and wiped off the olive oil that was running down his chin.

“Excuse me? One of those people?” She ground her fists on the edge of the table. He put his pizza down on the plate, picked up his glass, and took a sip of water.

“You’re always analyzing everything. You can’t take anything at
face value. You can't imagine that I might actually be a nice guy. That I might actually love you and that you might actually be happy.” He wiped his hands on his jeans, picked up his pizza again, and took another bite. Then he grabbed his glass and downed the last of his water.

   Happy? How could she be happy? She wouldn't get anything done if she were happy. She dropped her slice on the plate – “What do you know about me?” – retreated to her office, and locked herself in.

***

The next morning, Maggie turned on the faucet and grabbed her apricot facial scrub. In the mirror she noticed the letters H, J, K, and L imprinted on her right cheek.

   “Fall asleep on your keyboard again?” Jim grinned as he dropped his goldfish-imprinted boxers onto the faded yellow tiles and stepped into the shower. He looked thoroughly rested.

   “Oh shut up. Just shut up.” She flushed the toilet.

   “Ouch!” he yelled. “Jesus, Maggie!”

   She ran back to her office and slammed the door.

***

She heard him leave for Stokey's bar around noon. She was just completing some final editing on chapter twenty-three. She put her red pen down and left the refuge of her office. Now that he was gone, she could really get some work done. She flipped through her notes from the conference. She'd better research the Gramsci stuff that jerk Mark had brought up. He was always trying to make her look bad, as if she didn't have enough pressure on her already. All of her funding was tied up in that rice. She had to make the rice work.
She knew she had an article about Gramsci somewhere. She pushed through her old clothes in the hall closet and located her boxes of files. Jim must have moved things and, of course, he didn’t put them back in their proper places. She scanned the labels till she found the right box, picked it up and brought it to her office. She grabbed a pair of scissors from her desk and cut through the packing tape. Instead of her files, she found a scrapbook. The pink ribbon tied around it had faded, but she recognized it as her own. She opened the cover and her three-month-old footprints were sketched on the inside flap—her mother’s handiwork. There were pictures of her naked, pictures of her dressed in frilly white and pink dresses covered in ice cream, pictures of her lying on a burgundy velour mat taken from every conceivable angle by some hack Sears photographer. Each photo carried a caption in her mother’s airy handwriting: Maggie decides she loves chocolate, Maggie at the park, Maggie and her little blue blanket, Maggie at Sears. She realized it had been almost a year since she’d called her parents. She imagined them tending to the ranch and watching their satellite-dish TV, looking for new channels and pretending that they were visiting the world. “Hey hon, Brussels is on tonight,” her father would say. They didn’t understand why she studied rice. “You grow it and you eat it. What’s so complicated?” her mother would ask.

“It’s culture,” she’d answer, knowing full well that they’d never understand. That they’d never know why she had to drive herself so hard, why she could never be happy just sitting on the couch, being her unimportant self.

“No, it’s food. It’s the foundation of your stomach,” her mother would respond. “And I’m going to cook some right now.”
Maggie closed the scrapbook, tied the pink ribbon around it, and put it back in the box.

***

Jim was home by ten; final exams had cleared the bar out early. She asked him if he was hungry, but he said he was only tired. He kicked off his grungy jeans and crawled into bed. She went into the bathroom to brush her teeth and scrub her face. She was tired, too. She slipped underneath the covers and pulled up close to him.

"Are we fighting?" she asked. Maybe she'd been too hard on him. He had saved her from nightmare Mark, although she still suspected some kind of other-worldly explanation.

"If you have to ask, then we probably are." His eyes stayed closed.

She did want to break up with him, but there was no reason to fight about it. He was a good guy; they were just different. She still planned on giving him the first autographed copy of her future Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

"I'm sorry." She lay her palm on his shoulder.

"What for?"

"For trying to break up our marriage."

"If you're gonna do it, then just do it, because this little monthly ritual of yours has got me real tired." He flipped onto his back and sat up.

"I know we got married pretty fast – well, really fast – but what the hell have I done wrong?"

"Nothing." She switched on the lamp on her nightstand. "Except that you're such a slob when you eat." She sat up and held her pillow in her lap.

"Are you kidding me?" He turned his lamp on.
“And you’re a bartender.” She pressed the pillow against her chest. “Don’t you want more out of life?”

“Like what?” He pushed his flapping hair from his forehead.

“Like rice?”

She switched off her lamp and slumped down onto her back.

“At least I have something. At least I am somebody.” She gripped the pillow under her head. Rice had to be something. She had to be something.

***

She woke up with her nose pressed up against their wall. She’d dreamt that she and Jim had bought a big screen TV and a satellite dish. And they’d been named Nielsen couple of the year for most programs watched in a twelve-month period. Nielsen gave them a huge golden trophy that doubled as a floor lamp.

She reached her arm behind her, but the bed was empty. Jim must have gotten up early. She tried to remember what she’d said last night. She felt oddly guilty; she felt like she’d been mean. She got up and dragged herself to the living room. He wasn’t there. She looked for him in the kitchen, in the laundry room, in the parking lot. The Hyundai from Hell was still sitting in space number nine, but he wasn’t anywhere. Finally she checked her office. Propped up between the keys of her keyboard was a little scribbled note:

*I’m gone.*

She ran into the bedroom and threw open the closet door. Most of his clothes were missing, but he’d left behind his lucky Texas
Rangers cap, the one he'd been wearing in Vegas when they met. She slid back into bed and thought about him hitchhiking along the highway with his green army bag swung over his shoulder, except that he didn't have a green army bag and he seemed to have left all of their luggage in the closet. She pulled the covers over her head. In his head, he was probably writing poems about his shitty wife.

I made her lasagna.
I made her bed.
I made love to her.
But I never got love.
And I never got lasagna.
Not even the frozen kind.
Cause my wife didn't give love.
Or lasagna.
My wife was a shitty wife.

She got up a few hours later and made herself a cup of coffee. She glanced at the microwave clock: it was already three. She twisted the ends of her disheveled hair while she slurped coffee out of Jim's old beer mug. She'd already missed her appointment with her advisor. She shuffled to the living room and looked for the remote, found it stuck between the cushions of the couch. She plopped herself down in a big heap. Everything: the couch, the remote, the blue gingham placemats they had gotten at Target, everything looked so foreign without Jim there. She thought about the night they met.

"Those things'll kill ya. I never charge anything," he'd explained,
shooing her credit card away and handing the cashier at the Vegas
Paris Hotel buffet enough cash for both of them. He'd been wearing a
pair of jeans and a gray T-shirt. He looked like the poster boy for Gap.
She wondered if he was in town for the history conference.

"You can't just buy me dinner," she said. He must think I'm a
total loser, here all by myself, she thought. He probably thinks I'll
sleep with him if he buys me food. Well, he was cute enough, and she
was tired of talking to the other conference participants.

"Sure I can. I was going to do some writing, but what the hell,
I'm in Vegas, maybe I should meet someone new." That's when she
noticed the journal sticking out of his back jean pocket. A writer, she
thought. When she was in high school, she sat in Mrs. Abraham's
English class and dreamed about marrying a writer. Like Nelson
Algren. Or John Cheever. Or whomever they happened to be reading
that week. Her own personal fairytale maker to save her from her
studied, undreamy life.

Jim had suggested that they pretend they were food critics and try
every entrée in the place. She ate salmon and glazed ham and some
chicken stuffed with spinach and Brie. They shared their opinions on
every item in faux English accents. Jim's hand kept bumping into hers.

After dinner, he took her to a swanky bar complete with leather
chairs and a cigar room — it was named after Napoleon — and taught
her how to sip tequila. "Good tequila is just like scotch," he'd said,
pouring her a third shot. Then he reached into his back pocket and
pulled out his journal. It had a black felt cover and his initials were
engraved on the bottom right-hand corner. He flipped a few pages,
gave her a sheepish smile, and read her a poem. She couldn't remember
what he'd written about – too much tequila – but images of rain and a
cave lingered in her memory. She was almost positive that the poem
had not been about his mother. And, somehow, it hadn't seemed all
that bad, because when he finished reading it, got down on one
knee, and asked her to marry him, she didn't hesitate a second before
saying, "Yes."

***

There wasn't much on TV, mostly just talk shows. She pulled her legs
to her chest and hugged the cushions. In the middle of Oprah, when
some self-motivation expert was helping some woman, she heard a
key turning in the door. She hurried out to the hall and peeped
through the viewer. It wasn't Jim. It was her neighbor fumbling with
his keys while balancing three bags of groceries in his arms. She
returned to the living room. PBS was airing a show about European
travel. Hey hon, Paris is on, she thought. She watched for half an
hour and then went back to bed.

***

The red numbers on her alarm clock said two-fifteen. Moonlight crept
through a crack in the blinds, spotlighting the empty half of her bed.
Maggie sat up and shoved a pillow behind her back for support. She
tried to make out the various objects in the dark. It was mostly her
stuff. Jim had only brought the couch, some clothes, and his collection
of baseball caps with him from Texas. "I don't need much," he'd
explained. But there was something different; even with his things
gone, it still didn't look the way it did before her Vegas trip, before he
moved in.

Her stomach hurt. She hadn't really eaten anything the day
before. She got up and went to the kitchen, pulled out her emergency stash of Oreo cookies that were hidden behind the healthy granola cereal and Nutri Grain bars, and poured herself a glass of Coke.

"Cookies and Coke make everything better," her mother used to say while she stroked Maggie's hair back behind her ears. Cookies and Coke. Maggie knew it was totally vile, but somehow, when eaten in secret, it seemed ok. She took out an Oreo, pulled it apart, and dunked each half into the Coke.

"And all this time I thought you were some kind of health nut." Jim was standing in the doorway. Next to him on the floor were two green garbage bags with sweaters and Hawaiian shorts spilling out of them.

"You're back," she put her two cookie halves down on the table.

"I forgot my Ranger cap." He scratched the top of his head.

"I know." She looked down at the Oreo lying split in half on the table. The halves reminded her of pupils, like the ones stuck on the Winnie the Pooh doll she had stashed in her desk. "Let me get it for you."

"No, that's ok." He put his hands in his jean pockets. "I mean, it's pretty late already. Maybe I'll just head out tomorrow. Or next week." He rubbed the sole of his right sandal against the yellow linoleum floor. The sole left black marks. He saw her staring and stopped.

"If that's alright with you," he said.

"That's alright with me," she said, and immediately wondered if she had said it too quickly. She put both Oreo halves in her mouth. Then she stood up and took a step towards him. He straightened his posture. She swallowed some cookie. Then she picked up one of his
garbage bags and dragged it back into their bedroom. He followed her with the other one. "So, what's the deal with all those shitty mother poems?" she asked through a mouthful of chocolate residue.

"Nothing. My mom's great. But poems about nice moms just aren't very commercial." He dumped his clothes on the floor and then shoved them into a pile in the corner of the closet. He stood in front of the heap so that she might not notice it too much.


"You know they really suck, right?" she said, trying to keep cookie bits from flying out of her mouth.

"Yeah, I know." He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into his body. "But so what?" He reached inside his jacket, pulled out his black felt journal, and handed it to her. »