

## Salad

By Mia Juratovac

It's three in the morning and the kitchen is still lit up yellow from the old streetlight outside, leaking in through the window by the sink. Someone left the blinds tied up earlier, so she can see as she works. Lettuce makes a strangely moist sound when torn. It's organic, so when she has mostly filled the bowl there are only the tiny sweet baby leaves left on the core. She eats them all up in one greedy bite.

Next are the tired peppers and cucumbers, more wet noises and stickiness on the knife blade she grabbed from the sink, too tired to care whether it was dirty. They're just vegetables, they can handle a little dirt. The peppers are soft and some skin slides right off when she slices it. She pushes those pieces off the edge of the cutting board, into the waiting mouth of the composting bucket, half-filled with cucumber heels and lettuce cores and pepper seeds.

When she turns to the fridge for dressing, he speaks from the doorway.

"It's three in the morning," he says.

"You have a staring problem, go away." She fishes the Italian out from behind the Thousand Island, the Catalina, the Ranch, shakes it as the refrigerator door whooshes closed and she turns back to the sad pile of vegetables in the bowl. "I know it's late," she says.

He stands motionless in the doorway. "Why are you making a salad at three in the morning?"

She ignores him, and carefully pours the dressing. "Are there any croutons left?"

"I don't know," he says. "Why the salad?"

She rolls a shoulder noncommittally. She knows there haven't been any croutons for months. She doesn't turn to meet his gaze. "Too late for real cooking, too early for chocolate pudding? Does it matter?" Because he doesn't laugh at the reference, she knows he isn't actually here, that this is a memory. Her imaginary version of him has a much better sense of humor, and also more inane pop culture knowledge. She uses the knife on the cutting board to stab into the salad, gingerly picks lettuce and crunchy cubes off it with her lips and teeth, mouth oily from the dressing.

“You’ve lost control of your life.” He’s slid back in the doorway, now only a silhouette.

A drop of vinegar falls onto her sweatshirt. She pulls a stray hair away from where it has adhered itself to her lip. “Come back, would you?” she says.

But he is already gone. The lettuce is warm, the dressing has pooled in the bottom of the bowl and the peppers make everything else bitter. She dumps the whole of it in the sink with the twice-dirty knife and the memory of him and pushes it all into the garbage disposal. She lets it grind away to nothing but a bad aftertaste.