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A Night Indoors

By Daniel Carlson

I sit alone in our living room watching *Night at the Opera*. Groucho Marx stands outside his cabin, giving his order to the steward. In time to the movie I say, "And eh, two fried eggs, two poached eggs, two scrambled eggs, and two medium boiled eggs."

Chico, on the other side of the cabin door adds, "and two hard boiled eggs."

Groucho and I add, "And two hard boiled eggs."

From his bed, Harpo honks a small horn, and we both remark, "Make that three hard boiled eggs," nodding towards the steward. I take my feet off the table and lean forwards, careful not to spill my beer in the darkness. We continue, "And eh, some roast beef: rare, medium, well done, and..."

I'm cut off by the door, and I stiffen for a moment, hand freezing as it reaches for the remote, before saying, "Make that three hard boiled eggs." My hand returns, leaving the remote where it lay.

There is shuffling from the front door, and the soft swishing noise of socks moving across hard wood floor. There is a click and the room lights up slightly. The hall light, probably.

We continue, "And eight pieces of French pastry."

"John, we need to talk," Beth's voice says from above me.

"And two hard boiled eggs."

"Please," she begs, "John... I got the papers. You just need to sign them." Her body moves into my line of vision and she places several sheets of paper on the table, where my legs were earlier. She is wearing slacks and a neat-looking sweater with a collar poking out from under it. Her hair is in a tight bun, because she hates the feeling of it on her back when she has to wear her heavy coat.

Or maybe it is because she knows I love it when she has her hair down.

"Make that three hard boiled eggs." I pause as she looks at me, her hands gripping the side of the couch, "And one duck egg." They squeeze tighter.

"Enough." She reaches beside me, grabbing the remote.

"Have you," Groucho's voice cuts off, "got any stewed prunes?"

She tosses the remote onto one of our chairs and waits, staring at me. The VCR is still running under the TV, even though the screen has darkened.

"John, don't make this harder than it needs to be. Do it for both of us."

I look up at her, meeting her stare with one of my own. No two looks could be more different. Her eyes are watery, though no tears have fallen yet, and her nose quivers. I can't help but still imagine her as a rabbit. Out of habit I look at her ears. She hasn't worn any earrings today, leaving three tiny little pock-marks in her left ear, two in her right.

My gaze is cold, my eyes dry and narrowed, my nose immobile. Tiny dots of stubble spot my lower face like freckles.

She pauses, then asks, "Good God, John, how much have you been drinking?"

I break my eyes from hers, hand reaching for the remote before remembering she threw it to the other chair.

Raising my head, I say, "I don't want to sign them Beth, and that's final."

She searches around me, trying to find something. The remote? An empty bottle? Some piece of crap she left behind? She leans over me to look on the other side and stops, nose wrinkling. "John, when was the last time showered?"

I snort and push her away from me. "Stop changing the subject."

She stumbles back, landing against the wall. Something in her eyes has changed.

"I won't sign them Beth. Do you understand me?" I rise from the couch, "I won't sign them! We can still work things out!"

She almost sobs, but manages to keep it back. "John, this is exactly why we have to do this. Look at yourself! I can't live my life babysitting you! Not anymore!"

"Beth," I coo, voice low, "Beth, things will be different, I will take care of my..."

She cuts me off, "No, don't tell me that. Not this time." Tears dribble down her face, "You never change, John, never. You say you understand what's wrong, and that you'll fix it, but you don't! Even after all that's happened, you just don't get it!"

"Honey..."

"Don't, just...don't," she says, sliding an inch down the wall. There was a pause, both of us breathing heavy, "I'm tired, John. I'm just... tired."

I say nothing, shame welling up within my chest. I remembered her saying that once or twice before now, though by her reckoning she'd said it too much. She'd said everything before, but each time I still thought things was different.

That I'd been different, better, if only by a little.

I fall back into our couch, its legs chipping against the floor as I land. She slides the rest of the way to the floor, face in her hands. I look around the room. The walls are empty, her posters moved to her new apartment. The corner is bare, Roderick's blanket and food bowls gone, existing only in memory and a few stray pieces of kibble. The shelf next to the TV is in shambles, the boxes of children's cartoons my mom gave us now in boxes. The Eeyore lamp that used to light up the room, and the end table it sat on, had been removed, leaving it shrouded in shadow when the TV was off.

Through the wall I hear Lou Dobbs ranting about immigration. Beth snuffles. With a click *Night at the Opera* stops playing, and begins to rewind. We sit in the room that is no longer ours, waiting in the dark for someone to make a move as *our* life falls apart.

"Please John," she says after a while, voice horse. "I know it's hard, but please... if you ever," she gulps, "I know you... do it for me, John."

"Please."

I look at her, my mind flashing through the past. Days spent smiling and watching TV. Nights spent talking about everything and nothing. Sitting in the back row of the school auditorium, watching each other instead of the play in front of us. Singing each other to sleep. My breath leaving by body as I saw her walk through the door and down the aisle. Laying side by side with my hand over her stomach. Our joint sobs when Maggie turned blue. Fruitless counseling. Thrown books. Ripped posters. Harsh words.

"Give me the pen."

A single tear threatens to fall from the lower edge of my eye, but I blink it away.

Minutes later I'm in my living room, watching the blank TV screen.