

Loss of Appetite

Read to me, she says.

He pretends to be asleep.

Read to me, she says again. *I know you're awake, come on, read to me.*

He rolls over and pinches her. He turns on his reading lamp as he gets out of bed. In the kitchen he pours himself a mug of vodka and carries it back to the bedroom.

What? He asks, standing in front of the bookshelf.

What? She always answers a question with a question. It used to be cute. It meant she had an inquisitive mind, he thought.

He grinds his teeth. *What do you want me to read to you? Anaïs Nin? Emily Bronte? Dickens? De Sade?*

She sits up in bed, unable to make up her mind. Indecision used to be cute too. Somehow it made her seem like a woodland creature that needed protecting. *Never mind,* she says. It's frustrating to her, so many books and they are never on the same page.

I'm awake now, he says.

Never mind, she repeats and lies down again.

I've got a better idea, he says, *this vodka has given me a better idea*, he moves toward her.

No, she says, *I don't want to*.

You never do, he rolls off her.

Remember that time we drove out to the lake? She asks. *That car you had was no comfy bed like we've got now. I remember. You weren't the first you know. You were third*, she smiles. *Third place finish. A bronze medal. I could have had lots of others.*

You could, he says, *pinching her arm. I know you could.*

Sure I could, she says, as if he had disagreed. *But I didn't want to. Did you?*

Never thought about it, he says.

I read this magazine – the article said it's universal for men to cheat on their wives, but it's American to get caught.

He snores.

Outside the morning is warm and pink, inside the north-facing apartment it is cold and grey.

He leaves for work. She made him a sandwich of shaved Black Forest Ham and Cheddar cheese with mayonnaise. She knows he is allergic to cheese. She also knows he

has been trying, unsuccessfully, to lose weight. He will be forced to hate her at lunch, and she reasons that will curb his appetite.

Today is the day, she says to the sofa. *Today*, she keeps talking to the furniture. She takes out a suitcase and starts packing clothes. She takes down boxes from the closets that haven't been used since they moved into the apartment. She starts to fill each empty box with the opposite of its outside label. She heads over to the bookshelf. Too many, she thinks, they'll be too heavy to move. She takes some down to start a fire. The apartment is too cold, too grey.

When he gets home he notices the gaps on the bookshelf. *Where are my journals?* He asks. He stepped around the boxes and suitcases in the hallway as if they had always been there.

I needed them, she says. *It was cold, you know. Today's the day, I've decided, to move to California. It never gets cold there, in Southern California. There's nothing for us here*, she insists when he raises his eyebrows.

He wants to leave the cold apartment too. *No*, he says, *we can't go. I have my job. I have responsibilities.*

There's nothing to keep me here, she says.

There's me, he says.

She maintains there's nothing.

Who gets the bed then? He asks. *Who gets the microwave? The salt and pepper shakers?*

She thinks it's funny he would bring up more kitchen items than anything else. She thinks it best not to laugh because she is serious about moving. She won't need salt and pepper shakers in California. *Help me finish*, she says.

He is in the bathroom while she cleans out the closet in the hall. He finds her makeup and shoves it into her toiletry bag. He changes his mind and throws the makeup out the bathroom window. Then he stuffs her bag with toilet paper, trash and freshly used Q-tips.

All finished? She asks.

Done like dinner, he hands her the zipped up bag.

They turn to the bookshelf together. He picks up the Anaïs Nin book Delta of Venus.

That's mine. I remember buying it.

You gave it to me. For Valentine's day, He says, *It says right here, From Carol with love.*

She looks inside the cover and sees her messy scrawl. She should have printed the message. *I want it*, she says.

No, he answers. *I'll need it to keep me warm.*

Liar. You'll read it to the women you'll bring back here into our bed. They'll see how cold it is here, how cold your feet are. Cold feet, cold heart. It will drive them crazy when they find out your feet are always like blocks of ice, even if they're rubbing and exhaling on your toes.

I didn't drive you crazy, He says. You were crazy when I met you. You remember what you said last night? You remembered that first time at the lake – you told me I was lucky number three, third time's a charm. Now all you can say is I came in third. A third place finish. When did I stop being so lucky?

No, she says, I don't remember.

The way to a man's heart, he begins.

-Is straight through his ribcage, she says.

You're a terrible cook in every sense, he tells her.

I can live with that. Fine. I can't live with you.

Someday you'll turn fluorescent orange from all that Kraft Dinner, he tells her.

I'll be able to know where you are just from the nuclear glow. The thought comforts him.

If one day he wakes up to see a large glimmering orb at the end of the street he will know to exit the building through the back door.

At least I'll be warm, she says.

You can have my lunch, he tells her, I didn't eat it.

Have you lost weight? She sizes him up. She wants to get in every last opportunity to be cruel. She won't be this person anymore once He is gone, out of sight, out of her mind. She wants to go back to who she was before he presented himself, announced himself into her life like an anchor from a doomed Arctic expedition, barnacles and rust.

Yes, He says, *the weight of an anvil on my head. I feel as light as a feather now.*

When she blinks in surprise he says, *I've lost my appetite for living, I've lost clarity.*

You could still stand to lose a few, she says.

He would like to say 'Go, and don't let the door hit you on your way out.' But instead he says *I'm not happy either. I don't want you to stay. You are not as helpless as you pretend.*

This makes her wonder if she should stay. But he has already changed the locks on the cellar of his mind. She can't tell what he is thinking anymore. The truth is, she never could.