

Good Evening, Heartache

It was well past midnight and it had felt as if the evening had somehow slipped the bonds of time, pulling and stretching until blowing through some cosmic hole—throughout the night, people looked at watches and clocks and expressed surprise at how quickly the evening was going (“it’s 10 o’clock already”) and, alternately, how it wasn’t (“How can it be only 10 o’clock?”). And then it was just sort of over, some strange collective decision that it was time to go. The evening wound itself up, the guests, couple by couple, corralled exhausted and whiny children from various places around the house—in the basement; some in closets where they’d been hiding, making a mess of clothes and games and sports paraphernalia; one even perched on a shelf alongside massive stuffed animals, a pile of Cheetos in his hands and the telltale smear of electric orange crumbs easy clues to his trail. Initially, they said their thank-yous and goodbyes, often lingering so long at the open front door that kids tugged and pulled while the parents engaged in that odd drunken insistence that, yes, indeed they had a spectacular time even though no one ever really doubted that. But eventually everyone began to slip out without saying a word. The merriment had been done and it was time to scam.

The complete avoidance between host and hostess would, in the absence of the inoculating guests, eventually have to be reckoned with—at the least, there would presumably be a sunrise and with it a new day and there could no more hiding. But for now, perhaps, they had a few more hours. For now, they could crawl into bed and pretend . . .

Elizabeth wiped down the counters and the tables, muttering to herself, as she did after most of these gatherings, that she would never again host one of these things. Yes, some of the guests, only the women she had noted, gave any offers of help, but these were half-hearted at best. They were usually given with one foot already out the door, small fingers wrapped around the adult hand and pulling out into the night. If Elizabeth had said, “Yes, sure. You know, I would love some help,” there would have to be a finger extraction, placing the whiny shit somewhere (which, in itself, would only add to the chaos) and then waiting instructions as to who went where and tackled which job, a scene everyone knew wasn’t going to happen. But making the offer meant that one could not be accused otherwise. And so it was Elizabeth alone, here daughter already in bed asleep, her husband also, and there she was—alone and cleaning the house that she had already cleaned once, in preparation, some twelve hours earlier.

Yet another party. *Why do we keep doing this to ourselves?* More to the point, why did she keep doing it to herself? For John—the beast—was slumbering upstairs, no doubt with that sonic snore of his. And Elizabeth, as always, was left alone to clean up the mess.

It also occurred to her, not for the first time, that when they hosted these parties, perhaps she shouldn’t clean at all. Let everyone enter a pigsty. Maybe in that way, maybe by some strange law of party-making that she hadn’t yet discovered, the house would actually be *cleaner* when everyone left. But despite her anger over once again being the one left to clean up by herself—John didn’t even bother saying what he always said after these things, “Just leave it for morning and we’ll clean it all together. It’s not going anywhere,” to which she would always reply, and this is why it irritated her to no end when he would say it, “I don’t want to wake up to this mess”—she had to acknowledge that she found something pleasant about having the place to herself in this way. She would never admit this out loud, especially because the feeling didn’t always sustain itself, but there were times when she found the cleaning to be downright meditative and restorative. Probably the repetitive motion, the circular wiping, maybe, or the sweeping and swiftening in straight lines, eating up the space, transforming space from dirty to clean, from intolerable to tolerable, from uncivilized to civilized. Cleaning was the quickest and surest way of bringing a world of disarray into order.

When little else in her life could be tamed in this way—not her increasingly intolerable husband, not her unsatisfying actuarial job, not the lack of real pleasure she got from her friends—she could always stand in a room that had been rendered filthy and disorganized and, within a matter of half an hour or so, turn it into a space that offered peace and cleanliness and order. Another thing she would never admit: when John or Joanna did help her clean, she usually wished they hadn't. Inevitably, she would have to go back after them and do the job the right way. Even simple tasks like cleaning dishes; John just threw everything in the dishwasher, meals enough to feed whole villages of starving kids still clinging tenaciously to the plates. She'd pull them out—there was no need to have the same argument again, she claiming that they wouldn't get clean, he claiming that they would, she explaining that all that food would get mixed into the washing and simply coat all the other dishes, he explaining, in his most condescending manner, the mechanics of drains. So she'd take them out of the dishwasher, rinse them off in the sink, and then put them back in. Of course, she'd have to do this far from John's eye, for he'd make the same comment he always did when observing this: "If you're going to clean them in the sink, there's no need to put them in the dishwasher." The argument just wasn't worth it. So she'd wait until he wasn't around, all the while burning with anxiety over the fact that she knew there were intolerably filthy dishes in the dishwasher, every passing hour getting harder and harder to clean, that disgusting leftover food digging its rotting talons deeper and deeper into the porcelain.

At the beach house they rented every summer, where there was no dishwasher, the ritual was even more maddening. Somewhere along the line, it had been decided that the dinner cleanup chores belonged to John and Joanna. He'd fill one half of the segmented sink with warm sudsy water. "Make sure it's hot water," Elizabeth would remind him while Joanna would bring everything over and slip the dishes into the sink, one by one, clearly enjoying the way they slid under the suds and disappeared. John would scrub each and then hand them over to Joanna, who was responsible for rinsing them in the other half of the sink and then stacking them to dry. All the while Elizabeth would sit on the nearby couch trying to read but never getting beyond a paragraph or two because she knew, just knew, the abomination happening nearby: the utensils with flecks of meal, the plates with what she imagined as a wide swath of grease down the middle, the glasses still possessing the clingy remains of grape juice or Aranciata. She just couldn't understand how these things slipped the assembly line, and how every time. It literally made no sense to her. So she snacked on her nails, nibbling almost to the quick, and told herself she'd do it all over, do it correctly, once everyone else was asleep. Her only anxiety was in having to ascertain how many of the stacked dishes were "washed" this evening, how deep to go. To be safe, she'd decide, she'd simply do them all.

And so this late night solitary exorcism of dirt was good for her. It soon enough took on the feel of a ritual and she hoped to hell no one would wake. Whereas she used to burn at the fact that there was little chance John would be kept from slumber by pangs of guilt that they had co-hosted a party and only one of them was cleaning up, and would make his way downstairs to sweep and wipe and sanitize, now she prayed to God he was deep in the throes of inebriated slumber and would be dead to the world for the next few hours, under until the tug and pull of a hangover would rip him from dreamland and throw him dizzily into the yellow brightness of a rude morning.

She pulled on a pair of elbow length blue latex gloves, smiling at the satisfying snap of the ends as she pushed her fingers to the tips. She retrieved the bucket from beneath the kitchen sink filled with sponges, scrub brushes, various assorted cleaners—no-streak surface cleaner, anti-bacterial cleaner, lemon-infused general multi-purpose cleaner. Every surface with its own cleaner. A potpourri of cleaners.

Every lamp in the house had been turned on for the party; Elizabeth had always felt it important that brightness should dominate in social gatherings. It was a holdover from parties she remembered her own parents throwing when her mother, in her one bone throw to the domestic help, merrily waltzed through the family manse in her dressing gown flipping on every lightswitch on every wall and turning every switch on every table lamp with that incredibly satisfying click. It was as if she was chasing away all the darkness of the universe. Elizabeth would trail her during this, in her own mini-gown, and know that not only was light the obvious way to make the world bright, but one more thing, one very important thing: we have light at our fingertips and one need only flip a switch or turn a knob and presto, no more darkness. Darkness, it turned out, could be defeated.

So she kept each lamp burning as she cleaned, even turned the dimmer switches to their highest point. Every now and again, her path would take her just past the base of the stairs. There she'd see the dark, the light on her level swallowed up midway. She thought vaguely of snatching Joanna from her bed and on the way down sprinkling some lighter fluid, setting a match, and fleeing to the front lawn. But the thought passed; she smiled at it, knowing she was allowed to think such things because they weren't real and no different from the juvenile thoughts little kids have now and again, when they get angry enough, that their parents would just die. They didn't really want those things. Or, more accurately, they only wanted them in that brief moment of irrational wrath. Let them burn, and then let them be okay again next morning.

The noiseless vacuum cleaner she'd bought a few months earlier had been put to little use. She just didn't believe in its efficacy, needing to hear the growl and whine of the behemoth model she usually employed to be convinced anything was being sucked up. But she decided to give the noiseless a try now; it was well past 1 a.m., after all. To her delighted surprise, she could see the tracks of cleanliness within the dirt and grime as she swept through. It did work. Of course, she would give the house a proper vacuuming again in the morning, using old reliable, but this would do for now. It would, she figured, keep at bay the horde of insects she just knew were lying in wait, their little antennae on high alert, just waiting to communicate to one another the bounty that awaited them. John had often "joked" about her OCD. Well, shouldn't dirt be something one is supposed to be obsessive about? Shouldn't cleanliness, if nothing else, be the thing people should be compulsive about? She just didn't understand his flip attitude about it, the way he would thoughtlessly leave dishes in the sink at night; he might as well leave a sign: "All vermin welcome here!" She recalled with a shudder his cavalier attitude the time she discovered a little army of tiny ants running their obstacle courses all over the kitchen counter. "Sometimes, it's impossible to keep the outside world from coming in. This is a big house and there are lots of little cracks," he'd said.

"They're going to crawl all over our food," she responded, alarmed—alarmed at the prospect, alarmed that he didn't seem to care. "Our food, John, which we feed to our child."

"Where do you think these come from?" he asked, holding up a peach, an ant clinging to it with its back legs, its front twisting in the air as John swung the fruit around. "It grows on a tree. I am certain an ant or two, and quite a few other insects as well, have crawled all over this thing well before we got it." She flew out the door to the local pharmacy and returned with a plastic bag full of ant traps, which she placed all over the counter. From the living room, where he was watching TV, John said, "That stuff is probably far worse to be around our food than ants are. At least ants are organic."

She knew better than to ask him the obvious: "What then, we do nothing? Just live with ants?" She knew his response would be one of two things: literally no answer, just silent brooding, or, worse, some smartass retort that would make her plot how she could stab him in his sleep later that night or poison him over breakfast the next morning. She didn't need that, didn't like the way

those thoughts made her feel inside. She used to be a pleasant, gentle person. Now she found herself yelling all the time, seething with loathing for her husband. It wasn't the way she envisioned herself. It wasn't the way she wanted to be. She thought again of her mother, and couldn't recall one solitary instance of the woman actually yelling at Elizabeth or her sister. Not once. Of course, she handed off all the actual parenting chores, save etiquette lessons, to a string of foreign au pairs, so perhaps the comparison wasn't a good one. But still . . .

It was almost 3 a.m. now and the house was sparkling. One by one she clicked off the lights. Darkness. Total, complete, full. Elizabeth stood for some time in that darkness, soaking it in. She even found herself becoming a bit disappointed as her eyes made their natural adjustments. Darkness, sometimes, she figured, was good. Make a friend of it, for darkness, she knew—could just feel it—would be her constant companion in the days and weeks and months, perhaps even years, to come.

She crawled onto the couch and pulled a quilt over herself. She considered, not for the first time, what it meant that her husband had a mistress—for she was sure he did. He used to complain all the time about their lack of a sex life. Now he hadn't done that in months, close to a year probably. And they hadn't slept with one another in all that time. It was true—she had no desire to. Simply none. She simply no longer possessed the mental gymnastics required to make that leap with him and, if she was honest with herself, sex had never been terribly important to her anyway. Not with John, anyway.

It hadn't always been that way. There had been a guy once, in college—Dale, a dashing Englishman from Kent who'd transferred to her college, spent one glorious year there, imbibing the leafy loveliness of that small liberal arts campus tucked away in the hinterlands of New England ("I feel quite at home," he'd say often). She and Dale had met while in the employ of the college library, and their affection for one another blossomed among the stacks. It was the accent, at first, she had to admit. Every word he spoke seemed infused with import. "I'm going to empty this bin," he would say, pointing to the cheap plastic trash can kept behind the circulation desk, overflowing with coffee cups and crumpled overdue notices, and make it sound of no less urgency than if he'd entered the room cloaked in a long white gown clutching a clipboard and saying, "I am pleased to tell you that we have the results of your scan. The tumor is benign."

She'd order food in a little artsy coffee shop off campus and he'd study the menu with knitted brow, raise his eyes over his half-glasses, and utter, "I think just the ham and swiss," and she'd come close to swooning.

But it wasn't just the accent. He had an easy, hearty laugh, delivered with no hesitation or embarrassment. Cliché of clichés, he had pretty wretched teeth, turned at acute angles and speckled with brown spots, but he made no effort at hiding that, wearing it instead like a proud English badge. *We once ruled the world*, his bicuspid seemed to say. *No, it wasn't always pretty or righteous but it was, for all intents and purposes, a pretty reliable system.* And so he laughed and did not put a hand to his mouth. It was refreshing. And she loved him.

Succumbing to another cliché, she expected him to be somewhat of a milquetoast in the sack, perpetually bowing to her. And yet he turned out to be a demon, the best sex she had ever had. It made her insatiable. He was the first man she had ever been with in which she felt as if he wasn't simply getting away with something when they had sex. But it was far more than that. She felt safe with him, and warm, and valued. The way he looked at her with such intensity when she spoke. Either he was a terrific actor, schooled in the Shakespearean tradition, or he was legitimately interested in her. In everything about her.

But then the year ended and he went back to England. And while she was certain they would be reunited, they weren't. They kept in touch for months, but as trans-Atlantic phone calls

were prohibitively expensive and because this relationship took place before Skype and email and texting and even the Internet, the geographic distance between them was soon enough replicated in emotional distance as well until it suddenly stopped.

But because their relationship had never been allowed to progress to a stage in which they had decided that they really just hated each other or, more benignly, just realized that they simply weren't a good match, Dale had always remained for Elizabeth the go-to man of regret, the one she was just sure, in lonely hours like these, that had they been the recipients of better timing or circumstances would have made each other wonderfully happy.

Yes, John had been that man once, too, of course. And she wasn't so naïve to think that what happened with him would not have happened, perhaps, with Dale as well. But because it never had, well, it never had. And so she could dream . . .

As she shifted she could feel a few crumbs dance and fall into her shirt. She had forgotten to shake out the blankets that draped every couch and chair in the house. No doubt some of the slob hadn't even had the decency to take plates with them when they sat and talked. But now that she was lying down, she realized she was exhausted, and so she didn't bother to get up.

Crumbs. Little particles of food, some of them which had no doubt fallen from people's lips, or had loosed themselves on the short journey from hand to mouth, little pieces which must seem like veritable mountains of sustenance to those trillions of insects, at this very moment communicating in their food-driven languages that the woman was done vacuuming and wiping, that she was lying down, that the hurricane had ceased and it was time to claim their bounty. They were probably on their way right now.

Still, she didn't get up.

Darkness. Make a friend of it. Crumbs and insects—they were all part of the darkness. Might as well get used to it.