

First Ending

by Daniel Harris

They sat at a window table in McDonald's. He was grabbing a bite before running to an orchestra concert. His wife had just come from the gynecologist and was toying with her French fries.

—How can you eat this? she said looking at him with disapproval.

—Well, it's an hour's drive to the gig and I have to be there by seven. There's a short rehearsal of the Shostakovich before the concert at eight. I just came from a rehearsal. This is all the time I have for dinner.

—Why do you have to play the rehearsal? Aren't you coming in as a ringer?

—Yes, but in the Shostakovich *First Symphony* the principle clarinet has a major role, and I've never played with this orchestra or conductor. It's a tricky part.

—I don't see why you have to eat junk food *and* save their ass. They should buy you dinner.

—Good luck with that, I hope to come home with the check tonight.

—You better, there's no food in the house and I wrote the gyn a rubber check.

—What happened at the gyn?

—Not much.

—That's it?

—I decided to go off the pill, she said.

He didn't reply.

—Things that mess with your body chemistry can't be good for you.

She watched him grab a handful of French fries and stuff them in his mouth.

—Don't eat so fast. It's not good for you.

—Does this mean you're thinking of having a child?

—Good god no, she said, laughing loudly, spilling her French fries.

—So what are we going to do? I mean, I'm not ready to give up sex.

She watched a motorcyclist back-pedal his Harley between two parked cars.

—Well, we only have sex about twice a week. We could set aside one night for sex. I'll use my diaphragm.

—Didn't we do that already? The outcome was that you were constantly coming down with cystitis. I don't think you want to revisit those days. I certainly don't need to be making midnight runs to PDQ for cranberry juice or the drugstore for antibiotics. Besides there are lots of times we have sex more than once a day.

He tried to find her eyes, but her gaze was unfocused.

—Well, we'll use condoms. I shouldn't be the only one responsible for birth control. It's easy enough for you to jump on and jump off without any concern about the consequences to your body or future health. I'm not jeopardizing my future health for your short-term pleasures.

He stuffed his unfinished Big Mac and French fries into the paper bag. His stomach was in a knot already worrying about the gig. He didn't need domestic discord, or some new Women's Lib propaganda.

—Was this your idea, or the gyn's? he said rising up from his chair.

—Mine.

—You know you've made a big unilateral decision about our relationship. We're not even thirty and you are suggesting we restrict our sex life to once a week. I'm not ready for that.

—I want you to go to your doctor and get checked. I have the clap. My gyn demands that you get checked. In any case I'm not to have sex for another month.

—You think I gave you the clap, his voice raising.

—No, but get yourself checked. I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'll walk home.

She took the remains of her fries and dumped them in the trash. She headed to the exit.

He grabbed his clarinets and followed her.

—At least tell me where you parked the car.

—Around the corner about halfway down the block. You'll have to buy gas.

—Thanks.

—I probably won't be home when you arrive after the concert.

—What's that supposed to mean?

—I won't be home. I'm going to stay at Dorothy's tonight. I'll move my stuff out this weekend.

He looked at his watch. He was going to have to speed to make the rehearsal. If he followed her, there would be a public scene. Smart she chose a time and place where he couldn't respond to her. He wondered how many endings there would be before their marriage was finally over.

