

Out of the Question

by Andrew O. Dugas

Divorce was out of the question.

Jeremy sprayed cleaner on the stainless steel refrigerator and Corian countertops and buffed the surfaces to a mirror shine. Another blowup with Deborah and now where was she? Out walking the dog to clear her head, never mind that it was almost midnight.

That was okay. Jeremy was using the extra time to put a real polish on the kitchen. Something to make her feel better when she got back. After all the money they'd spent remodeling the downstairs, the dream kitchen that opened up into the dream sitting room and the dream enclosed porch, what a shame it would be to lose it all now.

Which they would, if he didn't play his cards right.

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There was a pounding of paws against the sliding glass door. Shadow and then Deborah right behind him, kneeling down to unlatch his leash and rumble the door open. She slipped out of her dog-walking clogs and into her house sandals. Not looking at Jeremy the entire time, of course.

Yet she lingered, and they'd been married long enough that Jeremy knew that this lingering was her way to invite him to say something, to start the new conversation.

And he hated her all the more for it. Why couldn't she just use fucking words like the rest of humanity? Why all the nuance?

In counseling, Dr. Kestler had said that communication wasn't the root of their problem, but that their different communication styles did work against them, prevented successful conflict resolution. Communication styles! Jeremy could barely suppress his smirk, at the time and again now, at the recollection.

But he knew what he had to do. He had to play his cards right.

"Deborah. Sweetie."

Her head lifted, but she did not face him. Yet. The head lift was progress.

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"I don't want to fight. I don't know why these things blow up on us." This much was true. Tonight's argument had begun over the correct pronunciation of radicchio.

Her head turned to the right, further away from him, but this was still progress. She was crying; he sensed the change in humidity.

"We have so much to be happy about, so much to enjoy together. Let's not fight any more."

Deborah turned dramatically, her jaw loose, lips and eyes swollen from crying. The lighting was perfect, emphasizing the sheen of tears on her cheeks. And the Oscar for excessive melodrama goes to...

"Then why? Why?" she choked. "Why are you so... so mean to me?"

Jeremy took a deep breath against his growing rage. "Let's focus on the repair for now." Repair was one of Dr. Kestler's words: extending a flower instead of a fist. Not resolution, but a cessation of hostilities through simple gestures that created opportunities for affection to return.

"Come here." Jeremy gestured toward the kitchen island with the new stools from Pottery Barn. "I made some tea for us."

Deborah straightened herself. Her mouth and cheeks and eyes tightened into a semblance of self-control. "That was nice of you."

He pulled out the stool for her and fetched the teapot from the range. He'd already set out cups and saucers on the polished surface. Before remodeling the kitchen and buying new everything, they had never used saucers. Her idea, of course, and he'd gone along. Of course.

"We don't need to talk, sweetie." He poured the rich brew, a decaf blend. "We can just be here, together. Enjoying our tea in our new kitchen."

Deborah sipped. As her brow unknitted and shoulders relaxed, Jeremy relaxed too. He hated this emotional interdependence, how he could never relax unless she was relaxed, could not enjoy himself unless she was enjoying herself, how when she was down, she brought him down. Not intentionally, but over the years her

tentacles had maneuvered into him and attached themselves to his soul, sucking out his life energy, leaving just enough soul so he wouldn't perish completely.

"This is nice. Thank you."

"We should put on some music."

The kitchen filled with the liquid reverberations of Shadow drinking from his bowl, big Labrador slurps.

She smiled at the sound, which made him smile too.

Which he resented.

But at least the repair had worked. There would be no more talk of divorce tonight. Now they would make up, if he was lucky.

Deborah took her shower. Jeremy sat up in bed, reading his book on the financial collapse. When she came back into the bedroom, she'd already put on her satin pajamas, a definite Maybe to sex if he was willing to tap dance for it. She turned out her light, so he turned out his.

"Goodnight," she whispered, her breath fresh from brushing and mouthwash.

"Goodnight." Jeremy rolled against her, pulling her against him in a loose spoon.

Slowly, he reminded himself. Slowly.

He slipped his arms around her, one hand cupping her right breast. He pressed his knee between her legs; she didn't budge.

"Honey, I'm too wiped out from the fight. Maybe in the morning." She reached around and clasped his hand against her breast. They were cuddling. Of course. Fucking cuddling. Why not?

"Sure, sweetie. I'm bushed too." Jeremy kissed the back of her neck, settled in closer against her.

And he remained like that, holding her gently, until her breathing deepened and a gentle snore purred from her throat.

Slowly, he shifted his hand from her right breast to her left, monitoring her snore all the long. He ran his thumb along the outside curve, close to where breast met underarm. Lower... and there.

The lump was still there. Had it grown? Jeremy thought so. He imagined other lumps sprouting like mushrooms elsewhere in her body.

Divorce was out of the question. As long as he played his cards right.

