

Gone Shopping

by Garrett Socol

Matthew Emerson was sitting up in bed, carefully taking a thermometer out from under his tongue when Carolyn knocked on the half open door with a single knuckle. "Busy?" she asked.

"Just taking my temperature," Matthew said. "Orally," he added.

Carolyn pushed open the door and entered the dimly-lit second story bedroom. She watched Matthew as his eyes struggled to make out the number on which the mercury landed. "How can you see anything in here?" she asked. "It's darker than the damn Abercrombie & Fitch store." She pulled back a curtain and opened a window to allow cool air to waft in and a brilliant panel of sunlight to brighten the area.

"That's better," Matthew said, eyes still on the thermometer. A second later, he lifted himself off the bed, wobbling slightly. Holding the thin instrument in his hand as if it were a trophy, he exclaimed, "Ninety-nine!"

"Congratulations," Carolyn said with glee as if she'd just heard some magnificent piece of news - perhaps a huge promotion with a hefty salary bump plus bonuses and six weeks of paid vacation.

The night table to the right of the bed was heaped with vials of prescription medication; at least a dozen bottles surrounded the silver base of the lamp. On the table to the left of the bed sat a plastic, twelve-compartment pill organizer packed with colorful capsules. Next to it was a ceramic cereal bowl in which red gel caps and white tablets were displayed, like mints in a candy dish. An inhaler, nebulizer and peak flow meter were stashed behind the bowl.

"You look good today," Carolyn said.

"I look like I've been on a hunger strike since 2006."

"No," she assured him. "Maybe December '07."

"If I were any skinnier, I'd be a voice."

She gave him a slow, amused smile. "Do you know how many runway models would *kill* to be this thin?"

Matthew found Carolyn's sense of humor a tonic, and vice versa. It was an established fact that they had more in common with each other than she did with Matthew's older brother Wayne who happened to be her husband. Not that she didn't love the guy, but their interests were art museums and football fields apart. Like Matthew, Carolyn had a keen appreciation for jazz, literature, Broadway musicals and *Ab Fab*. *Unlike* Matthew, she appeared healthy, vibrant and vivacious.

It had been Carolyn's idea for Matthew to move back into the eight thousand square foot family home in Hancock Park, an elegant, placid part of Los Angeles oozing with old world charm. The Emerson house, stately and colonial with its white columns and colorful flower beds, stood on an immaculate, tree-lined street aptly named Sycamore. Matthew was woven so deeply into this structure of his childhood - its spacious rooms, solid, old-fashioned furniture - that coming back felt like falling into the comforting arms of a trusted old friend.

Matthew had been living in the Noe Valley section of San Francisco when he got sick. Andy Grant, his partner of three years, had been taking care of him, but then he took a severe turn for the worse. He didn't have any qualms about leaving Andy; it was an easy-going, shallow romance that beared no resemblance to the turbulent love/hate relationship he'd had with Lloyd Rowlands. He literally thought he would die without Lloyd. But by the end of their sixth year together, Matthew's good-natured spirit had taken such an emotional beating that he felt as if a part of him *had* died.

"Will you go shopping with me?" Matthew asked Carolyn.

"Today?"

"Well, I might not be around next month, doll baby."

Carolyn's had stopped telling her brother-in-law that he had countless days ahead of him and his future was bright and cheery. He vehemently scolded her the first time she tried to pull that, and

she made a promise to him: No more polite lies. No more phony compliments. No more false hope. "Sure," she said. "Let's go shopping."

It took Matthew a full fifteen minutes to change into proper clothes for his first public outing in weeks. His muscles, joints, and bones moved sluggishly, like those of an elderly man, and Carolyn had to assist him each step of the way. It wasn't the first time she'd helped him get dressed, but every time she saw his gaunt body she had to repress a gasp. The bones of his ribs protruded, the knobs of his spine were more prominent than the spine itself, and his legs were more bone than flesh. It was like dressing a cadaver.

Everything was big on him: jeans, shirt, crew-neck cashmere sweater. The last hole on his leather belt didn't secure the trousers around his waist, so Carolyn punched a new hole in it with a pair of scissors. "See? We can solve any wardrobe malfunction," she boasted. Struck by the sight of this frail but still boyish forty-year-old standing before her, half smiling, shoulders hunched, she gently put her arms around him.

"What did I do to deserve you?" Matthew asked, happy to feel human touch for purposes other than taking blood pressure.

"Well," she said, "somewhere in your youth or childhood, you must've done something good."

"I guess so," he responded, completely aware that Carolyn was referring to a lyric from *The Sound of Music*.

"What do you want to shop for?" she asked, thinking bedding or books.

In a conspiratorial tone Matthew whispered, "An urn. For my ashes. I've earned the right to choose my own urn, don't you think?"

After taking a moment to digest these unexpected words, she said, "Yes, I unequivocally think you've earned that right."

"Don't tell Wayne, he wouldn't approve," Matthew said. "Where *is* he?"

"Last I checked he was shooting baskets in the back yard."

“Of course. Where else would he be, in the den reading Descartes?”

They descended the carpeted stairs like mischievous kids who'd just tossed a diamond brooch into a big goldfish bowl. Wayne, in a rumpled T-shirt and shorts, was taking a break from shooting hoops to guzzle Gatorade in the dining room. On the wall behind him was a framed photograph of the elegant Martha Emerson who had died a month shy of her seventy-fifth birthday. (The wealthy Emerson patriarch had passed away six years earlier.)

There was little affection between the brothers. Matthew's humble demeanor clashed with Wayne's volcanic sense of entitlement. Even as children they were polar opposites. Matthew followed the rules and Wayne broke them. Matthew studied diligently and Wayne cut classes to get high in the bathroom. Was it any wonder the parents seemed to favor Matthew? At sixteen, Wayne took his father's Bentley and rammed it into a mailbox. As punishment, he was forced to stay home the next day and rake leaves while Matthew was taken sailing. He never got over it.

Wayne had wanted a brother with whom he could toss a football and chase girls. Matthew was interested in neither, and Wayne's disappointment never waned. Matthew had always been smarter and taller, and Wayne's resentment never waned. If Wayne had been the younger one, he might have felt differently, but being two years older made matters worse. He was supposed to be the role model, the big brother leaving large, impressive footsteps for the younger one to step into. But he did nothing that could be held up as an example. Instead of trying harder, he developed a cocaine habit. The rebellious rich kid bottomed out at nineteen, spent some time in rehab, and emerged successfully sober. But by then their personalities had been molded and they remained two mismatched pieces of a familial puzzle. Matthew and Wayne were cordial to one another, but a year could go by without any form of contact. When their father died, they were forced to connect, but it was Carolyn who brought them substantially closer. For the first time, they had

something in common besides blood: they loved the same woman, albeit in entirely different ways.

"We're going out," Carolyn announced.

"Out?" he asked incredulously. "You're too weak to go anywhere other than the living room, Matthew."

"No, I feel good today."

"He feels good. And you look kind of sexy with all that sweat dripping off you."

"Really?" Wayne asked. He peered at Carolyn with his closest approximation of a smile. Then he focused on his brother. "You're skin and bones. If I looked like that, I'd stay behind dark, closed doors."

"If I looked as paunchy as you, I'd stop eating pizza and ice cream," Matthew responded.

"Are you both six years old?" Carolyn asked, annoyed. She grabbed Matthew's hand and led him into the cool September air.

"What did you ever see in him?" Matthew asked as he hobbled to the green Honda in the gravel driveway.

"Marriage doesn't make sense," she quietly said. "I love him, but sometimes I don't like him very much. He seems to be getting nastier by the minute."

"He's a lazy, immature son-of-a-bitch who's living off our father's money. And for some reason he's got this humongous chip on his shoulder. You deserve better, Carolyn."

"So where's the nearest Urns-R-Us?" she asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"If I'm not mistaken, and I rarely am, there's a big pottery store on Robertson that has a whole urn section. And if anyone asks, I'm on a starvation diet for a role in a movie about the Holocaust."

"Brilliant," she said.

The roads in Hancock Park were remarkably wide and often traffic free. There also seemed to be a paucity of people. Carolyn surmised that the properties were so huge that residents didn't need to leave the premises for a walk or a jog; they could

simply stroll the length of the house. Coming from a working class family in Detroit, she wasn't accustomed to such opulence. Even after she began earning a six figure salary as an optometrist, Carolyn was reluctant to spend a cent on anything that might be considered frivolous or unnecessary.

The pottery shop was located in one of the most bustling commercial areas of the city, on the border of Beverly Hills where every parking spot was taken with Jaguars, BMWs, Mercedes, and the occasional Corniche. "I'll drop you in front," she told him. "Then I'll find a place to park."

"OK," he said with a big exhalation of breath, as if he'd traveled a great distance. "See you in a few." Matthew climbed from the car without too much difficulty, and Carolyn zoomed off. The closest parking space, four blocks west, was slightly too small for her Honda Prelude but she managed to squeeze into it. Then she rushed over to Robertson Boulevard which was teeming with teenage girls carrying shopping bags from Kitson and Stella McCartney. "Haven't you heard about the recession?" she mumbled under her breath.

Carolyn entered the pottery store. Shimmering glass objects filled one entire wall. Another displayed small ceramic items: ashtrays, figurines, coffee cups the size of small bowls. The customers appeared sedated as they examined the colorful, overpriced items, each more gorgeous and more useless than the previous one. She found Matthew toward the back, cradling an urn with a tasteful black and gold pattern. When he saw her approaching, he held it up for inspection. "You think I'd look good in this?" he asked.

"No," Carolyn said, "I see you in blue."

"Right. Blue is a good color for me. How's *this* one?" he asked, pointing to a turquoise urn with a white dove painted on it.

"Do you really want to spend eternity in turquoise? I was thinking more of a cobalt blue or a cerulean." Matthew nodded in hearty agreement.

"You like those rustic antiques one?" he asked, pointing to a row toward the bottom.

"I prefer the cultured marble. They seem more solid."

"Yeah, I do too. In fact, I like this white one."

Carolyn picked it up with curiosity. "Not bad," she said, "but I don't think you want your final resting place to be called Chrysanthemum Delight, do you?"

Stepping down the aisle in synchronicity, their eyes fell upon an elegant porcelain urn in azure. Both stopped in their tracks. "This is it," Carolyn said.

Matthew reached for the urn and held it with care, like he was holding a newborn. "Gorgeous," he said.

"Are you sure this is the one?" Carolyn asked, knowing the answer.

"I'm sure."

"Me too. Let's get it."

The moment they arrived home, Matthew took the urn up to his bedroom and Carolyn poured herself a glass of cranberry juice in the kitchen. She took a giant gulp, then a giant breath. Then she gently put her head on the marble counter and wept.

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To the majority of their friends, the decision seemed inevitable. Carolyn and Wayne Emerson filed for divorce.

The irreparable crack took shape at a posh, popular steak house a half mile from the beach. It was a Saturday night and the place was packed with overdressed women showing too much cleavage. The men were in tight jeans, black T-shirts and dark blazers.

"Wayne!" Carolyn barked in a loud whisper as her husband lit a cigarette. "You can't smoke here."

"Just a few puffs," he said before inhaling.

A bejeweled brunette with unnaturally plump lips, seated at a nearby table, immediately noticed the smoke. "Excuse me," she shouted. "You need to put that out."

"Mind your own business, would you?" Wayne said.

"The air I breathe *is* my business," she said harshly as she stood up. "Do I need to call the manager?"

"You probably need a whole lot more than *that*, lady."

"What a major asshole," she said as she hurried away, presumably to find someone in charge.

"Put it out, Wayne," Carolyn sternly said. "Now."

He took another drag, then he put it out. When the large-lipped woman returned with a burly guy in a black suit, there was no trace of cigarette smoke.

After finishing their appetizers, a square-jawed waiter brought Carolyn and Wayne their entrees: titanic T-bone steaks, each with a baked potato on an oversized plate. Unfortunately, Wayne had ordered the *mashed* potatoes. "Is there something wrong with you?" he inquired in a voice so loud that several diners turned to look. "Is it really so difficult to distinguish mashed potatoes from baked?"

"I'm sorry, sir," the server politely said. "I'll bring your potato dish right now."

"You didn't answer my question, bro. Is it really that fucking hard?"

The waiter took a deep, frustrated breath. "No, it's not hard, but we're very, very busy, and mistakes can occasionally be made." He rushed off before any further insults were hurled his way.

"Give the guy a break," Carolyn said. "He's only human."

"He's a jerk," Wayne barked.

"No, he's not a jerk."

"I know a jerk when I see one," Wayne insisted, "and I'm telling you the guy's a jerk."

"You want to see a jerk?" Carolyn asked, exasperated.

"Just look in any mirror." She threw her salad fork on the pale pink tablecloth, grabbed her purse and marched through the restaurant. Before reaching the front door, she gently pulled the square-jawed waiter aside. "I'm so sorry," she said, reaching into her new leather

clutch that had been on sale for half price. "I want you to have this." She handed him a generous amount of money. "For my soon-to-be ex-husband's inappropriate behavior."

Divorce proceedings began immediately, and Carolyn surprised everyone by announcing that she didn't want anything of monetary value from her wealthy spouse. She requested one solitary item: the elegant blue urn that contained Matthew Emerson's ashes.

A look of surprise washed over Wayne's face. Then he uttered the last words Carolyn would hear from his lips for a very long time. "Take the damn thing," he said. "I don't like the color anyway."

