

Red

by Maria Robinson

Erwin came into the kitchen through the back door and went straight to the sink to clean up. Black mud and dried blood crusted his fingertips and caked the callused whorls of his knuckles. He used the round of strong-smelling soap he kept for washing up after gardening, carefully scrubbing the length of each finger and beneath each nail. The water was hot and his hands were pinked when he turned off the faucet and dried them.

His wife was not yet awake and he was glad.

He sat at the table and took slow breaths, looking out the window toward the big oak. After a few minutes he stood, took the glass pitcher of cold water from the fridge, and filled Red's bowl to the top. He set the water down on the table and took out the heavy pan he used for frying. He lopped a hunk of butter into the pan and set it over a high flame, then quickly sliced an onion into thin half-moons. He tossed the onion into the pan, filling the kitchen with a good morning smell. He set some coffee on, then sliced two potatoes into rounds and diced a slab of bacon into marbled cubes.

He was good and fast with his knife, and the rhythm of the kitchen brought his thoughts back in to manageable things: minding the flame, setting out plates and forks and cups for juice and mugs for coffee. He tossed the bacon in the pan and, when it started to crisp, the potatoes. He pulled some parsley from a little vase of fresh herbs his wife kept in the fridge and ran his knife through it. He picked a ripe-smelling grapefruit out from the almost-emptied crate his brother sent up from Florida, halved it, reached for the sugar, changed his mind, juiced it instead.

His wife wandered into the kitchen just as he cracked two eggs in on top of the potatoes.

"Morning," he said, grinding pepper onto the cooking food. She sniffed appreciatively, slipped her arm around his waist, peeked her

head under his arm. He put a lid on the pan and moved his arm around her shoulders, squeezed her against his side, let her go.

"Smells good," she said. She went to the table.

"There's grapefruit juice," he said, "and coffee. And... Shit—I forgot the toast."

"I can get it," she said.

"No, sit. I'm the chef."

He found a loaf of bread, tossed four slices in the toaster. He brought the salt and pepper to the table, then filled the juice glasses with the grapefruit juice and poured the coffee. He took the plates to the counter and scooped onto each a mound of bacony potatoes crowned with an egg, sunny-side up. He sprinkled the parsley over the top of the eggs, then popped up the toast and put the slices on a separate plate along with some strawberry jelly. He carried all three plates back to the table waiter-style, balancing the toast plate on the inside of his forearm. After he set everything down, he put his hand on top of his wife's head and took a breath. She turned her face up at him and smiled, and he let his fingers slide down the back of her hair, stopping at the base of her neck. He smiled then and sat down at the table.

The breakfast smelled good and the coffee smelled strong and he knew the juice was so sweet it was hardly like grapefruit at all, but Erwin couldn't eat. His wife was eating slowly but enthusiastically, chewing and sipping and spreading jelly on her toast without looking up to see that he hadn't yet picked up his fork. He watched her, tried to channel her enjoyment and make it his own, but he could not.

His idea was that the slow preparation, the accretion of good smells, would ease the sour turn in his stomach; before his wife came into the kitchen it had seemed possible. Now the potatoes glistened on the plate in a distasteful way and the bacon had a sinewy look that he did not want to feel in his mouth. Against the flecks of fresh parsley the egg's yolk looked viral, contagious.

"This is good," his wife said.

"Mm."

"Then why aren't you eating?" She pointed at him with the tines of her fork.

"Oh," he said. "I am." He moved to pick up his fork but stopped.

She looked at his hand, then at his plate, then stood and picked her dishes up and put them in the sink.

"I'll be upstairs," she said.

"Red ate Myrna," Erwin said.

"What?" she said. She kept her back to him.

"Red ate Myrna," he said. "He ate her."

She put her hands against her temples and knotted her fingers through her hair. Erwin watched her, wondered what would come next.

Another time there wouldn't have been much to it. How many times had it happened? The two of them, elbow-deep in the rich soil of the vegetable patch when along came Red, a squirrel hanging limp between his teeth, or slicked near-black with the blood of some chicken or field rodent, bits of feather or flecks of entrails stuck in the fur of his forelegs. They'd drop their spades or watering cans or baskets filled with end-of-summer tomatoes and give him a scolding and hose him down or toss him in the washtub if he needed it.

"Where'd we get this one," she'd say. Or: "Speaking of chicken—I'm starving!" And she would laugh and the sun would show him all the fiery colors that were hidden in her hair.

Then there was no binary; Red was their dog, it was their life. That was before the first Myrna. Now it was oppositional: his zucchini against her celosia, her rabbit versus his dog. Now blood sickened her. Soured her on Red, on both of them.

His wife still hadn't moved or turned around and Erwin thought she might have gone into a state. He thought of speaking but no words seemed cold enough or tender enough, and nothing in between seemed worth saying.

He looked down at the food and felt hungry for it. He picked up his fork.

She said: "You're eating."

Her voice was empty.

"Sure," he said.

He poked the egg and its yolk split wide and spilled out over the pile of food beneath. He watched it ooze and spread and a tightness inside his chest let go. The food was good even cold. He ate quickly and methodically. When he was finished, his wife wasn't there.

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After washing up the dishes Erwin went out to the yard. Red still needed a bath and Erwin wanted to check the ground once more for any stray bits of pelt or bone. He could hear his wife on the phone upstairs. Slivers of words, bits of laughter, the scrape-shut of a dresser drawer. Quiet bedroom sounds, quiet bedroom conversation.

She was talking to her lover.

Erwin had known for months. At first his jealousy was hot and sharp, lodged itself in his throat when she spoke to him, in his groin when she moved close. After a time the sharpness eased and something new took its place, something heavy and smooth as a river stone. The feel of it became a comfort; he thought the weight of it held his heart in place.

He pulled the washtub out from under the porch steps and turned on the hose to fill it. The water splinked and spluttered against the tin basin, swallowing his wife's voice.

Erwin knew he no longer understood her, couldn't make sense of the things she needed. He thought the lover might deserve her. After all, it was the lover who'd recognized the space the first Myrna left behind, known she needed it filled. Erwin had only thought to try again. He was a gardener, used to frosts and pests and dry seasons. He was always prepared to replant.

When the tub was filled he went for Red. He was under the empty hutch, licking the dried blood from his paws. He was a good old dog and still a good hunter. Erwin appreciated how little Red had changed over the years, how little things had changed between them. He knew that when he called Red over and pointed at the

washtub, Red would drop his head low and creep toward it, looking back over his shoulder after every few steps. He knew that when Red reached the tub he would stop and cringe, and that Erwin would have to hoist him up over the side and into the water. It made Erwin feel foolish, how grateful he was for those certainties.

He used his own shampoo on Red, scrubbing him all over. He spent extra time on his paws, carefully rinsing the blood-stiff tufts of fur between each pad. The bath took a long time; Red needed the washing.

When it was over Erwin dragged the tub around to the hutch and dumped it out. Without the sounds of the bath he could hear his wife again. He wondered if Red knew her lover. Erwin didn't. He decided early on to know as little as possible. It would leave more to his imagination while it lasted, but there would be less to hold onto when it passed. Once the squash sprouted up from the rabbit's grave there would be almost nothing left of it at all.

