

# The Back Burner

*by* Paul Hargreaves

Tanya rolls over gingerly, awakened by the kicking. The pillow beside her is cool and unwrinkled; she pulls it over and wedges it under her belly. She reaches for the silent alarm clock and depresses the button that illuminates its face. *Pico de gallo*, she says, tasting her lips. That would be yummy.

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Ramón illuminates the fasten seat belt sign. It's a formality that he knows will be ignored by the sole passenger in the aft cabin. As the turbines spool down, he hears the familiar guitar riff still being played, over and over again, to the strain of struggling lyrics. Below them, the clag shears open in irregular patches, the lights of Seattle resolving themselves through the thinning overcast then vanishing again by turns. On the tarmac, a dark limousine sits idling.

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In the kitchen, Tanya places a kettle of cool water onto the cooktop and ignites the ring of blue points. She massages the hollow of her arched back as she scans the contents of the fridge. A trickle of warm fluid shatters her inner calm but a quick dip of the hand confirms it's not blood. Her fingers tremble as she rinses them under the faucet. She turns off the gas and moves the kettle to the back burner.

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The cabin door swings open to shrill screaming. The captain glances up from the checklist at Ramón and rolls his eyes. The intensity escalates as the man with the guitar steps out, but falls away almost immediately as the black limo speeds off toward the stadium.

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Ramón leans toward the mirror and stretches the stubbled skin off the bulge of his Adam's apple. Triple blades clear a swath through the foam as flamenco notes chime from his iPhone — the special ring tone he shares with Tanya. She sounds panicked. He

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listens closely, urges calm. The concert should be ending soon and he should be back in what — eight hours? Have the contractions started? It'll be okay, he coos.

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It seems too soon to worry but she throws what she needs into an overnight bag and drops it beside the front door. He should be airborne by now. He'll be here soon. She can smell his aftershave in the foyer. Was that a contraction?

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The flight plan has been filed and the approach plates for Teterborough flagged. The caterer stows alcohol in the galley cabinet. Jet engines at full thrust periodically rumble across the open meadow of the infield. The wind sock nods, its gullet open to the shifting breeze.

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The musician stands naked, straddling the doorway overlooking the bay and spitting invective into the phone. Never, ever interrupt me in my room! He hurls the phone on the bed and returns to thinking about the prospects of his newest song — a touching ballad concerning the abiding tenderness of true love that'll be good, he reckons, for a million downloads in the first month. He's working out the gross when his legs weaken beneath him. The devoted fan rises from her knees and dabs the corner of her smile with a glossy fingernail. Who made my music man frown, she asks. Some bullshit about a baby, he says. Like I give a shit. I'm hungry, he says.

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The women have all heard about her husband. Indiscreet nurses. But Tanya secretly enjoys the tittering. One nurse says anyways it must be so glamorous — my guy's a plumber and that's my fairy tale. What's he really like, another wonders? Melts me like Monterey Jack under a broiler, says a voice in the bed beyond the curtain. Tanya is telling them what Ramón tells her to say — that the famous musician is a great guy, an honest-to-goodness gentleman — when flamenco notes dance up from her bedside table. Tanya braces for another contraction. It's okay to scream.

