

The Oscars

by Terese Svoboda

Her husband goes hard on her. No blushes--he goes hard all over, not just in the assumed area. He could have Blip! disappeared instead, how would his wife have liked that? He has to make a choice, his captors are waiting, they don't have time, that is to say, he says later, they didn't have enough time to cover the hole they'd made in time to get what they needed, so they make him go hard.

TV-entranced he seems when his wife first notices, although he could have been going hard for some time is what everybody said. Watching TV he did do in spades, true enough, but for professional purposes. He acted for a livelihood, which is why his wife thinks he is just Samuel Becketting her, standing there in the act of turning it on or off, standing so still in front of it when he could have been reading lines or going to the fridge.

He goes hard with his hand out.

He says they didn't mistreat him, that all he had to do was stand in the middle of a kind of stage and eat things he doesn't much care for--the food tasted like the cooking he does while his wife tears down sets, her contribution to the theatrical arts. He ate these bland things rather well, he knew that, and they took notes.

But of course his telling all this is later, after all that hardness has worn off, which takes months. At first his wife tries to soften his upraised hand by shaking it. The hand doesn't shake. She tries kissing his rocky lips, which only makes her cry. She then slaps his cheeks until they hurt her hand. He barely blinks. Finally she rubs her breast against that outstretched hand. His cock, hard as it is,

remains stiff against his stiff thigh.

Their doctor, an avid fan, makes a house call. He wants to be an actor himself and considers this anomaly a private performance and, after seeing to his patient's perfectly beating heart, suggests she charge French intellectuals pay-per-view, and to be sure to videotape him for an art performance. This isn't a Rain Man thing or an Awakening, he says, but I will do endorsements if you need me to. Then he tells her a joke about a pope going into a pharmacy for a prescription that is so bad she throws him out.

She puts her husband at the window to get some sun. Voiceover work had been depressing him. He had been telling her how he could not stand it anymore when she called out to him from the kitchen to just sit down, this sun is close to a Florida vacation as he will get.

Standing in that sun, he begins to sweat and smell. She drags him back into a corner and dusts him occasionally. When their son visits, they wedge him into the bath for a scrubbing. Her son can't resist telling him a thing or two, his patriarchal stiffness making it so hard to clean his withers. Soon the son is angrier than he thought and his mother has to shush him, fearing his father might have heart failure, she says, instead of movement.

They invite his friends over. Perhaps the sound of all that competition will bring him around. But there is nothing worse than a stony audience. Their guests eat handfuls of trash party food, snap their fingers in front of his face and go home happy, escaping with Not Me all over their faces.

The doctor does magic tricks dressed in several yards of Christmas tree skirting. When the wife doesn't respond, he says, Pain, push a pin through his finger, light a match under his nose.

I read his reviews out loud, she says. That should have done it. I'll bring my crystal ball, says the doctor. I'll summon the spirits. Bring him back to life.

Isn't that a little unethical for a physician? she says into her third drink.

He laughs, and is quick to admire the cornstarch she sprinkles around his feet to mark if he moves when she isn't around.

It isn't a week later when he housecalls yet again. The crystal ball comes in a miniature bowling bag. He sets it up on top of a cloth-covered card table, and they both see him inside it, looking at his feet and eating things.

Give me a break, says his wife. He could do that at home.

She doesn't worry so much about him after that, at least not about how little food she manages to force down his hard throat. The doctor, however, begins to visit more often, in order to inject him with vitamins. He should stay in familiar surroundings, says the doctor, not the hospital. He tells his jokes sometimes so quietly she has to move closer for the punch line.

These jokes are always not funny, that is to say, they are laughable. Usually he improvises badly, with telling clauses omitted or bits foregrounded meant to be mere color, or else he memorizes from websites that belong to no one who has ever told a joke. She laughs anyway, they lighten her husband's hardness.

The doctor rarely arouses an audience. He makes a swine of himself, does comic things with fruit.

She becomes hysterical.

He's not exactly watching, he says, moving one of the bananas.

He might come around, she says.

We could try being very passionate for purely medicinal purposes, he says, mumbling into her collarbone.

For a hard case, she says.

Meanwhile, those who have him can now convincingly chew and amuse each other with long chewing performances based on his. They put into his upraised hand the object every actor wants, an award gilt and subhuman in form, eyeless and featureless, very much depicting themselves--a senseless race--and he softens.

The doctor and his wife happen to be writhing their way to the bedroom.

He rubs his sore arm back to life, extricates himself from the umbrellas and comic hats of the closet he has been shoved into in a pique of their passion, and shaking his head as if to clear his ears of odd noises, he heads for the fridge, feeling peckish.

Otherwise, he feels extremely satisfied, a synthetic response to holding and having and indeed, being among the Oscars. He is halfway through a bout of sandwich-making when his wife, hair wild, rustles into the kitchen. I'm late, she says, stuffing her blouse in place, the set is not yet struck. She takes the sandwich from him and bites into it, an uxorial gesture meant to allay suspicion.

Time stands still for you, dear, he says.

Perhaps, she says, and she insists he follow her to work.

But I haven't showered, he says, sniffing himself.

You can't go into the bathroom, she says. It's broken, she says as if she means it. But she smiles at his bent head and then throws herself on him with fervor.

Of course it could have been all programmed into your memory, she says, and something else happened entirely. Or else nothing happened at all, which is what you might suspect of anyone standing in front of a TV. What does he remember of what people said while he was "gone?" asks the doctor, dropping by a few minutes later.

He says the reception was fuzzy, he could hardly hear in either place what with all the hardness setting in.

He does not, however, pay the doctor's bill.

When the doctor passes his hands over the crystal ball later for the three of them, the husband of course is not inside. Instead they see two stars appropriately costumed pressing their hands and bosoms against the glass, mouthing, I accept, I accept.

