

Kitchen Light

by Tyler Koch

The woman stopped halfway down the stairs and sighed inaudibly. Her hand rested lightly on the bannister, her right foot caught in the motion of standing on the step below.

A scraping sound echoed from the kitchen to her location, metal bristles on a metal pan, a constant, scattered abrasion. A pale overhead light cast a pale shadow on the kitchen tile of a man standing at the sink, head bent in focus. His right arm shook violently with the motion. There was only one other light in the house but its center was somewhere outside, a streetlight, or a passing car. It had the same, fleeting gaze of a late night wanderer.

The woman watched the man at the sink for a minute, saying nothing, caught in the same pose. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and sighed inaudibly again when the man clumsily banged the pan against the sink.

"You're supposed to use the soft side of the sponge," she said. Her voice carried through the silence with alarming ease.

The man turned his head sharply and frowned, looking from the pot to the woman on the stairs.

"But there's pieces of crust stuck to the pan."

"It's a non-stick pan. You have to let it soak in soapy water."

The man's frown deepened. "I've never seen you do that before."

"That's because you forgot to use olive oil in the pan."

The man inhaled and exhaled, but the frown remained. "I didn't know you used olive oil."

The woman nodded in a tired sort of way and allowed her foot to finally rest on the step below. Her hand maintained its grasp on the bannister.

"Well what should I do with it now?"

"Let it soak," said the woman. "The soap—"

"I know where the soap is," said the man accusingly. He set the pan in the sink and flicked the water off his fingertips. The door below the sink revealed an odd assortment of cleaning supplies, pet-stain remover though there were no pets, wood cleaner though there was no wood. But not dish soap. The man rummaged for half a minute before closing the door. Keeping his back purposefully turned to the woman he proceeded to check the cabinet doors to the left and right of the sink, nodding when he found what he had been searching for.

"They should write a disclaimer or something on the pan. How is anybody supposed to know?"

The man set the dish soap underneath the sink, next to the unopened pet-stain remover. "It goes better here, don't you think?"

The woman's face wasn't visible from the man's perspective. Instead he saw her outline sketched against the staircase, like a picture blurry and out of focus.

"And the pan was in a strange place as well. Wouldn't it make more sense for it to be above the oven? The drawer below was stuck and I nearly threw out my back trying to get the pan out to cook you dinner."

"It works for me," was all she said.

"What about me?"

"You're never here."

"I'm here right now."

The woman said nothing to that.

The man cut quite a figure standing in the pale light. A handsome man by any standard, and it was not unnoticed by the woman on this night. His watch lay off to the side, his wallet, his keys. His wedding ring was kept safe in a drawer upstairs even though he had yet to venture there since returning home yesterday evening from a work conference. The woman had heard him creep in during the witching hours of the morning, heard him shower from their downstairs guestroom, heard him silence his cell phone as he walked out the door just hours later. And now here he stood.

"I was trying to do something nice," he said. "Can't you cut me a break? Do you know how busy work is for me right now? It's all I can do to keep my head above water. I missed two meetings while cooking and cleaning up after you."

"The dinner was nice," said the woman.

"It wasn't," said the man dismissively. "But you could at least show me some appreciation."

The man's phone buzzed on the marble countertop.

"See? See how busy I am? That's another meeting that I'm missing."

"I appreciate it," said the woman.

The man still couldn't see more than the contours of her figure from where he stood, and he made no attempt to move. The phone stopped buzzing and a silence entered the house and hid beneath the tables and chairs.

"I just don't know what you want," said the man, shaking his head. He leaned back and rested against the countertop. "I made you dinner tonight. I cleaned up—I tried to clean up, even though there were no directions for this pan. The dishwasher is loaded. What more do you want?"

"Nothing. I don't want anything else."

"No? Then why aren't you happy?"

The woman ran her thumb over the bannister's wood. "I am happy," she said. "I'm happy you're home."

"You don't seem like it," said the man. "I thought we had a nice meal tonight, you know? A real meal, just the two of us. We don't get that often."

"No, we don't," echoed the woman.

"Then you should enjoy it. I did. Didn't you listen when I told you how much money we were making at work? My bonus is going to be huge this quarter."

"I'm happy for you."

The man nodded and crossed his arms. "That's why we're so busy, sales through the roof. We can't keep up with all the demand."

“That's great.”

“You know something? It is great. I was—”

The man's phone buzzed again, the screen coming to life, the color of ocean water paled beneath intense sunlight.

“I might have to take this. You don't mind, do you? Everything has already been taken care of.”

The woman said nothing. The man sighed and allowed the phone to go to voicemail.

“I should have gotten that. You have to understand I'm a busy man. People need me.”

“I need—”

The phone buzzed again. The man threw his hands up in the air and allowed them to slap his legs.

“I have to get this. You understand.”

The man didn't wait for her response this time. He answered the call and gestured a thumbs up at the woman.

“Bill? Sorry Bill. Had some things to take care of at the house.” The man's voice faded as he walked toward his office. “Oh that? Nothing really. My wife was com—”

The door shut and the words grew muffled.

The woman stared down the hall, at the sliver of light that spread like bright gold from the bottom of the door. Her gaze soon returned to the kitchen, her eyes scanning smoothly over the sink, the refrigerator, the pan soaking in the sink. She took another step, then another, until her feet touched down on the cool kitchen tile. She moved wordlessly and silently toward the sink.

The pan needed to be soaked longer and so she let it be. The dish soap she put back in its proper place. A sharp burst of laughter came from the office, followed by another. The kitchen light threw her shadow on the tile, her hunched figure as she began taking the dishes out of the dishwasher and placing them in the sink to be washed. The machine had been broken for months and since the woman only had her plate and silverware to wash on most occasions, she didn't bother with calling a handyman to come and fix it.

From outside the kitchen window she could be seen methodically cleaning the dishes and setting them on a dishcloth to dry, one after the other, a movement so practiced, so fluid, it was a wonder she ever used the dishwasher at all.

