

Heat in the Kitchen

Emily parked her electric smart car in the driveway, then entered her solar panel-topped house. She took her medium-heel pump shoes off by the door and put her pink fluffy house slippers on. She yawned, stretching her arms while passing by the spacious living room. Emily glanced at one side of the two-door fridge—a framed wedding picture of her and Mike, her husband, barefoot on the beach, carefree and joyful. Next to it, pictures of her younger adventurous years: in her twenties, a picture of her on the summit of a snow-covered Mount Everest when she volunteered to teach English to the Nepalese monks, a picture of her walking in the rainforest in Panama, a picture of her in the rice fields of China...

A light smile passed her lips as she opened one of the fridge doors. Inside, it sparkled with neatness and the kind of extreme organization found on a home makeover show. A bottle of soy milk and a bottle of kombucha sat on one shelf, and organic fruit and vegetables were kept in produce-saving containers. She drooled at the abundant food porn, an already chopped snack of cucumbers and carrot sticks.

Emily held one cucumber stick and was about to devour it. Suddenly, she grimaced, remembering she'd forgotten her hand washing ritual. She let go of the snack and washed her hands with anti-bacterial liquid soap. Only then did she chew on a carrot stick and open the kitchen cabinet to grab a bag of coffee with a photo of indigenous children printed on the label.

Emily pressed the 'on' button of the pricey coffee machine and enjoyed a cucumber stick.

Mike parked his monster-wheeled pick-up truck next to Emily's car. The truck dwarfed it, making it look like a key chain toy car by comparison. He, too, headed to the kitchen once inside the house.

Mike hugged Emily. “Hi, honey,” he smiled.

Emily wiggled out of the hug, feeling his weight crushing her ribs. A nauseating reek of a scent blocked the bitter and sweet scent of the brewing coffee. She liked to keep her designer suit smooth and wrinkle-free. She faked a smile while her eyes fixed on his work boots.

“No shoes inside the house, sweetie,” she said, looking at the muddy stains on the kitchen floor.

“I’ll clean it up.”

“Will you?”

“Yes, of course,” Mike said as he moved toward the fridge. The deafening squeaks of his boots on the ceramic tiles pierced her ears. She sighed and squinted at the trail of puddles Mike left behind.

The second door of the fridge had a picture of young Mike and Emily, taken during their early days of dating, in their old favorite spot, a chicken wing joint. Their eyes glowed with crazy inexplicable love, lust, a dreamy future, and everything in between. Sauce dripped off her mouth and stained the tank top she wore; fingers dipped in the condiment container. And a genuine laugh as Mike leaned in to kiss her sauce-coated face.

It was the time before the wear and tear of his job took full effect on his body. The comfort of beer, carbs, and sweets piled up on his bent spine while she remained the same.

A couple of Super Bowl magnets and a couple photos of Mike and his buddies, who all had the same look: white, heavy, and middle-aged, dressed in Minnesota Vikings jerseys.

His stomach growled at the sight of a family-size pepperoni pizza. The meat feast of the packs of smoked sausages and raw bacon slices grabbed his attention, but his stubborn hunger clenched his guts, refusing to wait another minute to be fed. Stacked cans of beer in the drawer, and 2-liter Coca-Cola bottles sat on the shelf.

Emily turned away. The sight of meat made her stomach lurch. She'd converted to a pescatarian diet a while ago, not that Mike cared to notice. For a moment, she could taste the bloody and greasy meat. She sipped her coffee elegantly, like a Victorian lady.

Mike's tired body crumpled on the leather recliner in the open space between the kitchen and the edge of the living room. He bit into the cold cheesy pepperoni pizza.

"Hand me a Coke, would you?" he asked while chewing and sputtering.

"Pardon me?" Emily unified her brows, pretending she didn't understand, but her expression and tone told a different story.

Mike gulped. "Coke, please," he said, about to burp.

"I'm your wife, not your maid," Emily retorted, quiet yet loud enough for him to hear.

Mike shrugged and pushed his legs aggressively to un-recline the seat, upset that she ignored all the times he made her hot tea in the freezing cold winter.

He grabbed the 2-liter and slammed the fridge door. He consumed half of it in one go. The soda leaked a small stream at the edge of his mouth. He placed the bottle on the island.

Emily turned her back to him and looked out the kitchen window at the small gray garden outside.

"How was your day?" Mike asked, and picked up another slice of pizza.

“My class went very well.” She smiled, seeing the wind moving the swing outside. “I love when students respond and participate in group discussion. Yours?”

“That bitch boss....”

Emily squeezed the edge of the marble kitchen counter. She turned to him, interrupting his answer. “We don’t say vulgar words in this house.”

Mike had the urge to remind her how she could cuss a blue streak when the mood struck her.

“Why? Who is going to hear us? Our children, who you refused to have?” He licked pizza sauce off his finger.

“You want children; grow a uterus.” Emily pointed at the floor. “Are you going to clean the mess you made?”

“I will clean after I eat.” Mike chewed on another bite. “Anyway, I was saying, that *bitch*,” he stressed the word, “boss is an idiot. She hires unqualified people just for the sake of ‘diversity.’”

“You’re dropping crumbs everywhere.”

“So?”

“You’re making a mess.”

“I said I’ll clean it.”

“Will you?”

“Yes,” Mike said. He dusted the crumbs of his jeans onto the floor. “John called today.”

“Umm...” Emily’s face tightened, jaw grinding teeth.

“He invited us on a double date.”

“You’re welcome to go.”

“Alone? On a double date night? What do I say when his missus asks about you?”

“Tell her some women have jobs and professional lives. They have a purpose other than fulfilling their husbands’ needs and shooting babies out of their vaginas.”

She hadn't always been an uptight career woman who looked down on those with different life choices, but she definitely was now. What had happened? She didn't really know, but that's who she was now, and she made no apologies for it.

“My mom stayed home and raised five boys.”

“And, how did that turn out?” Emily smirked.

“She’s the best woman I know. She worked tirelessly raising us.”

“We should get ready for the museum reception.”

“I told you I’m not going.”

If she had reached out her hand and touched his hand gently, just the way he liked, he might have changed his mind. He couldn't remember the last time her touch healed him, not wounded him, as it had lately, becoming an unpleasant recurring habit.

“You never go to any events with me. It’s as if I’m torturing you.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, to what?” Emily raised her voice.

“I’ll clean the kitchen.”

“We should get ready.”

“I’m not going to some libtard event.”

“Fine. I won’t take you to a libtard event, and you won’t ask me to meet your redneck friends!” Emily shouted.

In the few events Mike had attended, Emily had introduced her colleagues as, “so and so is the chairman of the museum,” or “so and so is a world-renowned activist.” Then, she introduced *him* as, “This is my husband, Mike.” And she dodged any conversation regarding Mike’s line of work. In fact, she excelled at it. The only one who knew she was doing it was Mike.

She looked at her picture, the one where she was on top of the mountain, and her heart ached at that familiar yet strange feeling she now so rarely had; the feeling that she could conquer anything. Now it felt like a distant memory from a past life. She mourned the death of the part of her that knew how to live. What happened to that girl?

“Let’s move away from here.”

“To where?”

“Thailand! Dubai! Italy! Anyplace else.”

Once they had crammed into a tiny space in the middle of the king-sized bed, spooning and warming each other. He went to work, and she went to school. Then they had spread away, each finding refuge on the far edge of the bed.

She spent sleepless nights on her bed, staring at the ceiling, fantasizing about a new adventure. Sell handmade jewelry in Thailand. Learn Arabic and spend her days in the souks and coffee houses of Dubai. Buy a one-Euro house in some declining little village in Italy, and renovate the place to her liking, a place she could call home.

“I grew up here,” he said. “My family and friends are here. This is what I know.”

The typical Midwest answer she had heard a hundred times. Her eyes glared at him with the accusation he hated most; being a simpleton.

She dreaded his work and forgot that his long hours in the field, in the dirt, funded her prestigious degree, paid the bills when she volunteered, and provided healthcare when she labored in non-profits without any benefits to help build relationships and build networks she could call on for favors later. The nice house sheltering them was the result of years of him putting his dreams on indefinite hold so she could chase hers. He had bought the Starbucks-level espresso machine she couldn't live without. All these free trade brands and food she consumed came from his bank account. After every destination, she posted photos on social media and added every fancy workshop to her resume. For all these and more, there was a check signed by Mike.

She called herself an intellectual and ate chickpea pasta. “What the hell is chickpea pasta?” Mike silently wondered. What happened to the girl who ate chocolate fudge ice cream? That girl had existed in a time before Emily banned sugar and replaced ice cream with Greek coconut yogurt. Before she had started following every trend on Instagram, started keto, detox, cleansing... He couldn't keep up. There were too many.

The agony of waiting for her breath to tickle his ear as she whispered, “I love you” had grown to be too much. It was now a relic of the past, and he knew it.

When was the last time they had shared a meal?

Who would take care of her if I was ever gone?

Emily was too proud of her education and status. Of course, she was too smart for him. For god’s sake, he thought black pepper was “spicy.” He was satisfied eating bland, flavorless food. He hadn’t experienced the curries, saffron, cumin, turmeric, ras el hanout, and gochujang.

Who would want him if I ever left him?

On her way out of the kitchen, Emily pushed the uncapped soda bottle off the island’s edge. The soda frizzed, foamed, and flooded the floor.

“Clean the fucking kitchen,” she barked over her shoulder on the way to her car.