

## Leftovers

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Kneeling, neck-deep in the refrigerator, white light suffusing<sup>1</sup> her face, she tosses his mother's food into a black garbage bag beside her. He stands at the Formica countertop, watching her, wrapping dishes and utensils in newspaper. The house is so quiet. All the radios and televisions are gone. Most of the rooms are so barren they echo.

5 I count six bottles of mustard, Renee says. And butter. Eight sticks<sup>2</sup> in here, and four boxes in the freezer. Four boxes. She lived by herself. Did she put butter in everything?

Renee wears elbow-length yellow rubber gloves, constantly swipes strands of hair away from her face. Blows at them, angrily, as if they were mosquitoes, wasps.

10 Mason walks two boxes out to the trunk of their car. He breathes deeply. His mother had never quite approved of Renee, would've hated to find her there, in the kitchen, scrutinizing the contents of her refrigerator. He never understood it, how they could dislike each other, so politely, so quietly, so instinctually. And Renee, equally obstinate about his mother. Renee had hated his mother's "fashion", her interior decorating, her taste in fiction, her cooking. Hated it. All of it.

15 Steadily, they are emptying the house out. [...] Mason had gone through her clothing. Renee refused. He had thrown out her silk stockings, her brassieres, her negligees. Dispossessed<sup>3</sup> the wire hangers of their clothing. Cleared out her dresser drawers. What else could they do? Everything so worn. Each garment mended and remended. The cotton worn so thin it was like gauze. He looked for her wedding dress but never found it.

20 I'm just going to throw these leftovers away, Renee says. I mean, this is disgusting.

His mother cooked rich food. Mason loved her cooking. Even after leaving home and traveling the world. After marrying Renée, after losing twenty pounds and never regaining it. Still. Cold winter nights he thinks about her lasagna. Her cassoulet. Her chili. Her pâté. Her Bolognese. Her fresh bread. The butter dish. Ice cream and pie and cobbler. The nights he and Renee came to visit his mother, and he ravenously shoveling the food into his mouth, taking seconds, wiping grease and olive oil off the plate with sliced bread. His mother heaping food onto his plate, smiling. Renee, across the table, politely nibbling, pushing parcels of food around her plate as if her dish had been poisoned. Smiling grimly. Standing over the sink, [...] he thinks about nights there, Sunday nights when he might leave Renee at home and come to visit his mother. Flowers in his hand.

25 There's a lightbulb out in that hallway, his mother would say, I'm scared of ladders these days. Or, The toilet is always running. Keeps me up nights. Would you mind looking at it?

35 His mother, boiling noodles, steam collecting into droplets on her eyelashes. His mother, wrapping leftovers in aluminum foil, handing the food to him like a package, saying, Here, bring some home for Renee. Tell her I missed seeing her this evening.

Renee, who loathes leftovers. Who leaves doggy bags and cardboard boxes on restaurant tables for waiters to rush after them yelling, You forgot your food! Renee, reaching for those leftovers as if they were a bomb she had left there, its timer counting down to 0:00.

40 He can't remember the last time they made love. It has become a memory game, recalling that occasion. Sometimes, even when they are together, perhaps at the grocery store or

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<sup>1</sup> bader

<sup>2</sup> pakker

<sup>3</sup> befriede

riding in an airplane, he will close his eyes, feigning sleep, and think, Has it been a year? Two? Three?

They don't talk to each other anymore. At least not substantively. Financially they are comfortable and money is no longer even an entrée into conflict. She plays bridge three  
45 nights a week. He is on a bowling league, plays softball with a lineup of other older guys. The only thing they have left is movies. They drive to a multiplex beside the highway. Sometimes they don't even see the same film. When they do, they rarely speak before the show. Or after. He works a sudoku puzzle, she peers at her telephone. She falls asleep on the drive home. Sometimes he carries her into their bedroom, removes her shoes, pulls the  
50 quilts over her. She has mumbled I love you, but he can't remember when. Sometimes she asks that he leave her in the car to sleep.

One evening they disagreed so vehemently about a film that she did not talk to him for three days afterward. She banged around their house, slamming doors, rattling pots and pans, breaking dishes.

55 How does a distance so wide open between two people who live together so intimately? Who have loved each other? He can't explain it. Can't explain where the magic, the love, the friendship, the decency, the partnership went. He doesn't miss their sex. But he longs for her as a companion. A person to walk with, to hold hands with, to watch television with. To be happily silent with. He wonders if she feels the same, or if this rift is just something that has  
60 opened inside him.

A bad quiet envelops their marriage. [...]

Miracle Whip, Renee says. She had two of those. Wouldn't want to run out of Miracle Whip, now would we.

She throws the glass jars into the garbage bag.

65 Mason stops working and looks at her, on her knees, the edges of her underwear peeking out from her blue jeans. He feels something like lust rush over him and he considers going to her, fucking her, surprising her. Maybe that is exactly what they need. Maybe that is what she wants from him. To end their cold war. To collapse onto, against, each other, for all their tension and anger to be broken loose.

70 But he is afraid. Afraid she'll scream, afraid she'll look at him like he's a madman, a rapist. And maybe that is what it would be; how can he know anymore.

She stands up slowly, her hands pressed against the small of her back. He smiles at her. But his face feels stiff, his lips dumb, the muscles there frozen. Smiling, it seems to him, has become like a rainbow in wintertime. Not impossible, but implausible<sup>4</sup>.

75 I need a break, she says. I need some fresh air.

He touches her shoulder and she startles, as if shocked. She looks at him coldly.

He could not have cleaned out the house without her. His mother had lived in this house alone for the past thirty years. She was not a hoarder<sup>5</sup>, but she did accumulate things. The attic had been the worst. Mouse turds and dust and pink fiberglass insulation and heat and  
80 cold. Boxes of magazines, boxes of yarn, of Christmas lights and relics of Mason's childhood. Box by box they threw it all away. A two-person bucket brigade.

Renee never complained. He still admires that about her. She is tough.

Last year, Mason had a heart attack. It happened at the movies. All the telltale symptoms: the sweats, the lightning bolts of pain in his left arm and chest. She knew right away.

85 Hold still, she said evenly, let me get help.

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<sup>4</sup> usandsynligt

<sup>5</sup> manisk samler

He was glad then, for her telephone, which she used to call 911 while he sat, watching the opening credits of a film they would never finish.

She followed the ambulance rather than ride with him.

90 Go on, he said, I'll be okay. It just makes sense. Then we don't need a cab to come get the car.

She had stared at him.

He knows that what he should have said is, Please. I need you. Please come with me. I'm scared.

95 In the ambulance an EMT<sup>6</sup> said to him, You're a lucky man. Your wife caught it quick. Most people aren't that lucky. A few minutes' difference, and man, I tell you, you're a goner. And look at her back there. She's keeping her cool. Practical too. You guys thought to get your car.

100 Mason wept, his face falling apart. He did not make a sound. The EMT turned to him and said, Man, you all right? You in pain? Let's get you some meds. Hold on, man. Stay with me, man. You're fine. We got you. We got you. Hang in there. I'm right here. Your wife is right there, man. I can see her. I can see your wife, man. She's following us. We're almost there.

105 He gets to his knees, peers into the refrigerator. Even after all Renee's work, it is still full of food. Apples, carrots, cabbage, cheese, milk, pickles, salad dressing, sour cream, whipped cream, yogurt... It looks like she was still feeding a family. Like she was ready for him and Renee to come over for a feast. Like she was lonely for visitors, diners, mouths.

He misses her. She knew that he wasn't happy. Once she asked about his marriage. She put her hands on his face, as if he were nine years old. Looked into his eyes until he could no longer look at her and aimed his eyes at her kitchen table.

110 She said, Getting a divorce doesn't mean you failed. It just means you grew apart. You and Dad never got divorced, he said, still looking at the table.

Oh, sweetie, she said, your dad and I weren't happy for years.

I still love her, Mason said.

I know you do, baby, I know that you do.

Renee returns to the kitchen. I'm hungry, she says. Let's go. We can come back tomorrow.

115 He lets his head sag. Feels the refrigerator's fan kick on, hot air hitting his knees, cold air against his face and neck. He is tired, lonely, heartsick<sup>7</sup>.

Come on, she says, get up.

He can't look at her. No, he says. I'm going to stay here. There's food enough here.

120 He reaches for an orange Tupperware container in the back corner of the refrigerator. He peels the top, and the container seems to burp. Or sigh. It is cassoulet. He stands, carries the Tupperware to the microwave. Leans against the counter while the food heats. He looks at her.

You know I won't eat that.

He nods.

125 So what? So you want me to bring you back something, so you want to walk home, so what?

The words are a reservoir, his teeth, his lips, are the dam. He shakes his head, bites his lip. Mason?

Inside the microwave, the food circles like a carousel. The light in there is strange.

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<sup>6</sup> *Emergency Medical Technician*: ambulanceredder

<sup>7</sup> tung om hjertet

130 Mason?

I'm going to stay here, he says.

He owns the house now. Or they do – but already he's certain that he wants to live there the rest of his days. The microwave beeps loudly, three times. He lets it beep; what's the hurry? Reaches for the Tupperware and it's hot enough to burn his fingers, his palms, but he  
135 doesn't wince, won't give that to Renee. He carries the Tupperware to the kitchen table where he's eaten hundreds, thousands, of meals. Walks again across the kitchen. Gathers a fork. Pours a glass of whole milk. It is so opaque<sup>8</sup>, so thick, so white.

Mason, that food could be a week, two weeks, old. Who knows? Are you all right?  
Mason?

140 Her voice is rising.

He looks at her, says, I'm so sorry. Thinks, I want a divorce.

Then he forks a bite of beans, of duck, of sausage. Lifts it to his mouth, chews, smiles. He imagines his mother's hands preparing this food. His mother's mouth eating this same food. He imagines tasting her lipstick. Imagines her, alone, sitting in the same place he sits now.

145 He chews slowly, washes the food down with thick milk. His throat pumps it all down.

Mason, she says. Mason, I'm your wife.

He shakes his head, says, I'm sorry. I'm just so sorry.

(2015)

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<sup>8</sup> uigennemsigtig