

The Broken Husband

Epoch

When Ray broke his leg at the start of the summer, on the eve of his first vacation in years, everyone Rita worked with showered her with sympathy. Even the mechanics helped out. They took her side for the first time ever. They stopped by her office and said things like, "Divorce him, Rita," and, "Ray could really use a broken head."

But now it was just old news. The accident happened a month ago. Ray's leg would be a long time healing, and as he stayed at home recuperating in sweltering heat, the tide had slowly turned in his favor. Everyone forgot about Rita, as if her sense of injustice should be measured by the moon, and should now disappear, like the moon's waning light, into a hole at the edge of the sky.

For the last eight years, Rita had been manager of the Auto Center at Sears. How long did they think she'd wait for a better department? She started at Sears twenty years ago, cashiering. For four years she earned minimum wage, then slowly moved up through the ranks. She'd been head cashier, floor clerk, assistant buyer, buyer-trainee, trainee-manager. She'd taken courses at night at the community college extension program, which was held at the high school. She took math and accounting, data analysis, advertising, and "Basics of Behavioral Labor." Every one of them was boring, and when the instructors let them out early, it was always a relief. Sometimes she ended up sitting around chatting with her classmates, like a family at dinner, except that everyone got along.

At last, when Sears promoted Rita to a salaried position, it astonished her that they had counted her company service by hours and days instead of years. They had saved all her time

sheets. They had docked her for every time she'd gone over her sick days and every hour she'd ever been late. She had worked part-time for a couple of years at the beginning of her marriage; they held this against her, too. Her starting salary as a manager was only sixty dollars more a year than her punch-card pay. When the time came to assign her a department, they looked around and said, "What's the worst place we have, because that's where we're sending Rita Baird, ha-ha."

Well, up theirs. She was thinking about looking for a new job. But every time she took a break off the pit, or found herself with a moment away from the noise to sit and think, she couldn't bear it, and went looking for something to do, or for someone to talk to.

It was nearly the end of the day. Rita made her way to her office at the back of the pit, which she shared with the department assistant, Tina DiNato.

Tina was on the phone. When she saw Rita she placed her hand on the mouthpiece and whispered, "It's Ray." Rita motioned for Tina to say she hadn't come back yet.

"She might be on the floor somewhere, Ray," said Tina. "I'd have her paged, but I don't think there's anyone on the switchboard. It's wicked dead around here."

Tina was younger than Rita, but she was pregnant. She had the washed-out, drained look of a pregnancy that is not going well. The baby would be her first. She was over her terrible morning sickness, but something was wrong with her back. She took Valium twice a day in what she swore were low doses. Every few hours she took a nap. She didn't have to try to fall asleep; she just sat at her desk and thudded down shut immediately. But anyone who walked by the office would think she was working. Her desk faced a wall. She slept with her elbows on her desk, her hands cupping her chin, and she looked like she was scrutinizing something on her monitor.

Tina hung up the phone and said, "I wish you'd give him a break."

"He gave *himself* one."

The accident happened on the night of the road crew picnic, at the V.F.W. campground at the lake. Rita's mistake was that she hadn't watched Ray more closely.

She'd sat with the rest of the wives by the water. The cool, clean smell of early summer was in the air, and the woods around them had seemed, for the moment, like real woods, not an RV camp. All the hookups were obscured by the trees. It felt good to be out. "We can't believe you got Ray to take a vacation this year," the other wives kept saying. So far, she and Ray hadn't made specific plans. Maybe they'd take a long drive west to the Rockies, or north to Montreal; or maybe they'd just stay home together. Someone from the crew had hung plastic Chinese lanterns in the trees. It had seemed to Rita that something of herself hung there too, moving this way and that across the lake in skittering, colored round shafts.

Ray was head of the road crew. He had probably started drinking before the kegs arrived. When one of the spigots broke, he hadn't been the first to get down on his knees and hold his mouth there, but he had done it the longest.

It had rained that day; the ground was muddy. He slipped while playing horseshoes—a husband falling slowly in a strange kind of cartwheel, falling to the mud of the shore, with a silver U in his hand and such a goofy expression, it seemed, at first, he was kidding. But his leg had crumpled beneath him. It turned out that he broke it in two different places, and he had also wrecked part of his knee. In the moment before he cried out in pain, Rita saw him staring at the horseshoe. He had looked at it like he was thanking it for bringing him such good luck.

In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, Rita tried to talk about this with him, but Ray just looked at her sadly and shook his head and said, "I can't believe you think I did it on purpose."

Rita fixed up the downstairs rooms to accommodate him. He was given crutches but he had also injured his left wrist, having used that hand to try alleviating things when he hit the

ground. He said he was not allowed to put pressure on it, so he started hopping and hobbling to get around. Rita suspected he thought of the crutches as an insult to his self-image. He slept on the pullout in the den. Evenings and weekends, when Rita was home, he said it was too painful and complicated to hop and hobble to the bathroom. The hospital had given him a bed pan and a urinal. He'd leave them sitting at the edge of the rug in the den for her to empty. She didn't know what he did when she was at work. When she came home at six, the bedpan and urinal were always clean, and in their places just under the pullout, where she had left them that morning. Beverly Aubuchon, who came in to fix his meals and do a little light cleaning, had made it clear that this was something she wouldn't take care of, because she was not a personal attendant.

One day, Rita asked her if Ray moaned a lot, especially when his last round of codeine wore off. Mrs. Aubuchon had looked at her like she didn't know what Rita meant. "I keep the radio on in the kitchen," she'd said. "If he's cranky, I turn the song up." She was paid through Ray's workmen's compensation. He was supposed to have hired health care workers: first an attendant, then a licensed physical therapist.. Someone on the crew found Mrs. Aubuchon instead. They had figured out a way to fudge the details. But Rita had gone along with it. Beverly Aubuchon was a good cook, and didn't mind making meals for Rita, too, which was a luxury. Her whole adult life, not counting the times they went to people's houses for dinners and barbecues, no one had ever cooked for Rita.

"Go home, Rita," said Tina. "Dougie will be back from his break in ten minutes. I'll cover the pit till he's here."

"You're the one who should go home," Rita said.

"No, really. I just woke up."

"I'll have to come back and close."

"Who's on for supervisor tonight?"

She meant which inter-department head. "Frank," said Rita.

"Slime Frank from Personnel?"

"No, the good one. But he won't make the night deposit because he's got that long commute, and he leaves it overnight. If I'm audited, forget it." Unlike the rest of the store, which turned over its daily cash to a Brinks truck, the Auto Center had a separate account in a downtown savings bank. Whoever locked up at the end of the evening had to make the night deposit.

"You just want an excuse to get out of your house," said Tina. "There's no one to check you. They're away on vacation with their boats."

The red customer light by the door of the office blinked on. With an effort, Tina heaved herself from her chair. She moved clumsily, as if her body were ten times its size. She was barely six months pregnant. Rita had never been pregnant. In the first few years of her marriage she'd gone twice, to different gynecologists, one a woman and one a man, to find out why. Both had told her that the lining of her uterus wasn't rich enough. The way they had put it was O.K. with her. They had sounded like people who ran 4-H clubs, and had tested her yard in case she planted a vegetable garden. Rita tried to imagine how Tina felt. She wondered if Tina would give something up—her car, say, or even her house—to have it over and done with without agony. When Tina talked about her pregnancy she said women should be built like kangaroos. She wished she could feel a strange tweaking one day. Looking down at her body with amazement she would watch her new baby crawl madly up the side of her belly, as small as a thumb; she would stand there holding open the pouch. Or she'd say, "Why can't women lay eggs?"

When Tina stood up, her foot knocked over her purse, in its usual place on the floor beside her desk. The zipper was open. As the purse fell, a package of Tums rolled out, and something

else. Rita looked at it. It was a small plastic bag with a bloody piece of tissue or gauze inside. Rita leaned over to pick it up, but Tina, who suddenly moved surprisingly quickly, got it first. Tina blushed.

Rita said, "I thought you weren't seeing the doctor till next week."

"I'm stopping by when I get off. If you really want to know, I have an appointment at six-thirty. It's no big deal, so don't look at me."

"You were spotting again?"

"No."

Rita sighed. "So what's in the baggie?"

"I'm not saying. You'll just tell me what a sicko I am."

Tina put on her Sears blazer, which had been hanging on the back of her chair, and picked up her purse and slung it over her shoulder. She looked at the blinking light as if she'd been hoping it would stop, and whoever was out there had changed their mind and gone away.

Rita said, "I'm sure a little spotting is normal."

"I'll call you when I get home."

"If you have to sell a battery, get Dougie. Or go out to the floor and get Walter."

"No way," said Tina. "They make me feel enough of a cow as it is." When Tina opened the office door they heard a car horn. Someone was leaning on it hard, waiting for the big pit doors to open. Pausing in the doorway Tina looked over her shoulder and said, "If worst comes to worst, and I lose it, I'll kill you if you try to talk me into getting pregnant again."

"I'll do what I want!" cried Rita. After a while the car horn stopped. Rita picked up the phone on her desk and buzzed the auto counter in the store. Walter Dawes, the night salesman, answered. "I'm leaving," said Rita.

"Great," said Walter. He had, under the counter, one of those electronic games. Rita heard it blipping away in the background. In the time it would have taken her to go out there and take it away from him, he would have stashed it somewhere, so she didn't bother. He said, "Is Tina all right? I just saw her walk by and she looks like a zombie."

"She's fine."

"You know Bobby Cipello, he works for Ray plowing? He was in here buying a steering wheel cover. You just missed him. He said to tell Ray from the plow crew that next time he throws a horseshoe, he should try to remember letting go."

Rita hung up. Tina's maternity leave didn't start for another seven weeks. Rita didn't know who she'd get to fill in. She had asked Walter, who said no. She was thinking about Dougie, their best mechanic, who she had hired last year from the Citgo station near her house. He would hate the paperwork, but he wanted to buy a new truck, which he would steadily, expensively maintain in the pit, with stolen parts, in front of Rita's eyes.

Rita picked up a piece of chalk and signed herself out on the time board. She wrote, for the good Frank, who was assistant store manager and whose slipping out early she never minded, "Back for the deposit at quarter to nine." She had not begun to consider her own vacation. She had three weeks coming to her. But every time she tried to imagine future moments, like the tire sale in the fall, which she should have written up by now for the advertising people, a lid shut down on her mind, just fell and shut tight.

She gathered her things and went out the back way and drove home. Ray's truck was at the end of the driveway in the spot someone from his crew had parked it the night of the accident. At the edge of the yard, in a patch of shade from the truck, Ray was sleeping on her old sofa.

She went up to the porch. For the last five years the old sofa had stood in the basement under painters' cloths in a pile of furnishings that made her think of the back of a pioneer's wagon. There were tables and chairs, lamps, old rugs, and boxes of dishes and linen. Rita saved most of the things they discarded from the house for the vacation cottage they might buy, even though she only had to say the words "A cottage," and everyone who knew Ray jumped all over her to say she'd never get him out of town, not even for part of a summer.

His crew! Moving the couch to the yard was exactly the kind of thing they would do—Pete Bester, Davey Mastromatteo, Ty Green, all of them. They only visited Ray when she was working. They were probably planning to turn her yard into their own private hangout with lawn chairs and coolers. Soon her coffee tables would appear by the overgrown yew hedge; her old chrome kitchen set would come out from storage for their card games. They would bring out her television set, plug it in the extension for the lawnmower, and run it like an orange tail from one of her windows. Meanwhile, the lawn was getting worse every day. It was weedy and spiky and the grass was way too high and Ray did not care.

Rita called, "Wake up, Ray. Is Mrs. Aubuchon still here? Are you going to try to tell me that my couch walked out here by itself?"

Ray just lay there with his eyes shut, camped out and breathing lightly. He wore a light blue t-shirt, one running shoe, and gym shorts that were a little too tight. The cast on his leg was like a laminated cocoon. He was supposed to have gone to the hospital yesterday to have a stump attached to the bottom for walking and leaning, but the crew guy who promised to drive him called the house and said he was all tied up with some tarring, some road problem. Ray would not shell out for a taxi. He had not yet made a new appointment for the stump. The cast was covered with signatures and messages and really dumb drawings in different colors of magic markers, and it

was propped on two of Rita's good flowered pillows from the living room. The pillow under his head was a bed pillow. The yellow and white striped pillowcase that Rita had put on it that morning looked odd out here, like one of those drawings for children where they have to guess, What is wrong with this picture? What if it rained? Would they string up a waterproof awning for him, or run out and buy a tent, when a sudden downpour would ruin her sofa forever?

She went into the house. She opened the door hard, but at the last minute, before it hit the metal frame and started rattling, she caught the handle, and closed it gently.

There was a note on the kitchen table in sprawling writing that covered the whole page. It was from Mrs. Aubuchon. "Mrs. Baird, I had to send my daughter Pam (my middle one) to get your supper. But she can't stay long. She has to go to her drivers ed. class. Please don't hold it against me this one time or report it. I'm laid up from having dental surgery that did not go so good. Yours truly, Beverly Aubuchon. P.S. I'm planning to fix that nice sirloin roast in your freezer tomorrow."

Mrs. Aubuchon's daughter had made a start at getting supper. The potatoes in the big pan on the stove had been partially boiled, but they were far from soft, and they hadn't been peeled, and they had not been washed. Some skin had floated to the top with all the brownish foam. The smaller pan at the back of the stove contained a mix of canned peas and canned corn and many tiny bits of margarine.

The oven wasn't on, but inside was a cookie sheet with neat rows of fish sticks. They hadn't been cooked. The table hadn't been set. Two plates were on the counter, each with a folded paper napkin, and two glasses and two forks. Rita thought, Where's my tablecloth, and at the same time sniffed the air. She smelled something wrong, something burning. It was the odor of burning plastic.

She went down to the laundry room. On her way through the basement she held one hand in a cupping gesture at the side of her face so she didn't have to see the storage area and the emptiness where her sofa had been. She felt like a voice in one of those public service announcements against drugs when she whispered to herself, "Just don't look."

Mrs. Aubuchon's daughter had washed the tablecloth and had placed it in the dryer on high. It whooshed softly. Rita opened the door. The cotton lining of the tablecloth was still damp, but the plastic had melted. There was plastic all over the drum, stuck every which way like strips and wads of hot gum. Rita pulled out the lining and balled it up and put it in the trash can, and linty gray dust rose up. She'd have to come back when the dryer was cool to scrape it out. On her *knees*.

Rita had an urge to unplug the dryer, take hold of it, yank it out of the vent, and tip it over on its side. She felt this so strongly that she was sure, for a moment, she would do it. She felt strength would come rushing into her arms like a human on tv with secret powers, and she looked around for something to hit it with after it fell, as though her brain had presented to her, in stark letters, like a traffic command on the side of a road, the word "Attack." The shovel in the corner? One of Ray's softball bats?

She stood there and waited once more to see what would happen, and after a moment, she began to think about Mrs. Aubuchon's stupid daughter, who didn't wash potatoes and didn't know a cheap piece of plastic when she saw one. If the dryer turned out to be ruined, Mrs. Aubuchon and her daughter wouldn't care. They'd think all she had to do was ask Sears for a new one and she'd get one free.

Now she had to go upstairs and throw into the garbage the food of that awful girl. If Mrs. Aubuchon ever copped out again, she was getting, Rita decided, *fired*. And what about supper? Should she leave early to go back to the mall to take care of the deposit? Eat at the food court, and

bring silverware from her kitchen and maybe a plate? It was too depressing to eat a meal out of styrofoam containers, using plastic utensils. Would she look like a woman alone; would people at the tables around her with their children and their noise and aliveness feel sorry for her? Should she take Ray with her? There were wheelchairs at the mall entry. God, he would hate that. But if she left him on his own he would raid the fridge and wolf down all the wrong things. The codeine, she remembered, made him so constipated.

Again she paused to see what would happen. Above her, outside the tiny cellar window, the last of the day's yellow sunlight slanted down off the roofs of her neighborhood, and through the trees, slowly and peaceably, like wax down the sides of a candle. It would be dark soon. The mosquitos would be coming any minute in hordes, zooming in on Ray, saving her the trouble of going back out there herself to wake him up.

Some plastic had stuck to her hand from reaching in the dryer. It was still a little warm, a little moist. She found herself rolling bits of it into pellets, like spitballs. She started flicking them off one by one, and a pellet struck the side of the dryer with a light sound of tapping. There. She felt better. She had hit something.