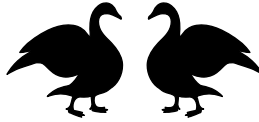


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CHECKOUT



It's almost three years ago to the day since your divorce became final, and you run into your ex-wife, Anne, in a grocery store, a Piggly Wiggly in Monmouth, Virginia.

You don't exactly run into her, you spot her over a pyramidal display of canned peas. You see her and she hasn't looked up yet from the list she is peering at in the seat of her shopping cart. It is late June and outside it is sweltering. The Piggly has its air-conditioning running high, and you feel a shiver slide down your spine. Anne is wearing loose khaki shorts and a white sleeveless blouse that accents the liveness of her tanned arms. You linger behind the peas, almost staring, wondering if it really is her. She lifts her head and adjusts her wide-framed glasses, and you are assured by her movement that it could be no one else. Her motions, as she brushes back the bangs of her hair and reaches for tomato paste, are artless and natural, like the motions of a cat unobserved.

This thought reminds you, just for a second, of Spider, the brindled tabby that once lived with you both. Neither of you spoke of Spider with a vocabulary of ownership, never referred to him as "our cat." One day he was at your back door, Anne feeding him milk and a can of Spaghetti Os ("There was no tuna," she said later), and then he was living with you. You remember how Spider would stand on his hind legs and try to climb your body as you played Mozart loud on the stereo and waved your arms like a conductor. Spider left with as little notice as he had appeared, weeks before the divorce was even mentioned. Even after selling the house, you traveled the neighborhood, hoping to catch sight of him.

Despite the chill of the air-conditioning, you feel a trickle of sweat begin at the back of your neck. You notice that you are taking very shallow breaths, that your hand, ringless, is clutching too tightly the plastic handles of the basket you are holding. There is a fluoride-enhanced gel toothpaste and an extra-large bottle of Roloids in your basket. As Anne pushes back her bangs with her fingertips once more, you notice her wedding ring. You're so close to her that you can see her jewelry, yet she hasn't seen you. You hide more of yourself behind the stack of peas, just in case. You look around, up the pasta and bread aisle behind you, trying to spot her new man, the husband. You've never met him. You don't know what he looks like. But you are certain that you can pick him out, place him. You create an image of him stepping confidently from the toiletries section, carrying in his hands expensive mint dental floss, natural deodorant from Maine. You think of her placing these objects in the shopping cart on top of the toilet paper and yogurt and then reaching out her hand to pinch his ass as he heads off to find a bottle of mid-priced domestic red wine. At the same time, you review the plans you have made for just this contingency, happening upon your ex-wife and her new husband. You will be gracious and good humored, maybe even offer to buy them a drink at a local bar. You will exude contentedness and good will, assuring her that it was right what you both had done, divorcing. No hard feelings. You will make sure they notice how trim you are looking lately, how muscular your legs are from cycling. You will all shake your heads at this heat.

Then you realize that you are leaning against the peas and the top cans in the pyramid are threatening to fall. An older woman with curlers in her dyed hair has crept up behind you and is clearing her throat, indicating that you are blocking the rigatoni. You notice how long the queues at the registers are, five or six people each, and everyone looks tired and gray. A man's voice from the aisle next to you whines, "But these don't make my clothes soft enough." You are aware of a woman's voice emanating from two hidden speakers, "Remember, shoppers, Sunday is Father's Day." You throw a single-serving box of pasta into your basket.

He's not such a big guy. That's your first impression when you see him. He's not small by any means, just sort of averagely built. He comes carrying some cold cuts from the deli section and kisses her on the cheek. There was a TV show on some years ago, *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, starring Bill Bixby. That's who he reminds you of. Then you see the definition of his arms in his white polo shirt and the cut of his jaw, and you think *maybe a tennis player, a high school wrestler*. From your position at the head of the pasta aisle

you can see them walk, she pushing the squeaky-wheeled cart, toward the pet food section. You think you will learn something by watching him, but you still haven't decided if you want Anne to see you. You feel like a spy, a man on a dangerous mission.

You are invisible unless you reveal yourself. You play it safe for now, carrying your basket up the housewares aisle parallel to theirs. They don't look like they will be buying any housewares today. You can't see them over the shelves loaded with Rubbermaid, but if you strain a little, you can hear most of what they say.

Murmuring and half sounds and then, “. . . too expensive for a cat,” he says, you catching only the end of his sentence.

Then, in a voice that carries through time and distance and the accumulated housewares in front of you, mops and brooms and light bulbs, you hear her say, “. . . chicken cutlets, Hal. I'll get some wine.”

Your first thought is, of course she wouldn't leave the wine to him. She always trusted your judgment with wine. Then you realize his name is Hal. *Hal*. What kind of name is that? You repeat it to yourself, *Hal. Hal. Hal*.

You hear them reach the end of the aisle; you hear Hal's murmur and then the squeaky wheel of her shopping cart as she starts for the wine section. She will pass the end of your aisle, and you might be seen. Now is the time for you to approach her, to let her know of your presence, while Hal is poking cutlets. You see the nose of her shopping cart before she gets a chance to look down the aisle to where you are standing, waiting for the sight of her. At the last second, you turn in the opposite direction and quick-walk over to where they have been, Pet Food. You hear the squeaky wheel pause and wonder if she has recognized your retreating back. Heart pumping, you wait for a sign, perhaps her voice calling your name with a question mark attached. You are equal parts dejected and relieved when nothing happens.

Now that you know his name, you want to look at him again, give him the once-over. A plan is forming in your head. You will meet this man Hal, and he will not know you, not know what you share. You correct yourself, *shared*. You will have to move fast. Right away you pick out what it is they were looking at on the shelves of pet foods. A bag of Pet Fancy With Real Liver Bits, a bag that must weigh twenty pounds, is turned perpendicularly to the other bags. Pet Fancy is the cat food you used to feed Spider. And Hal was right, it is too expensive. But if you can't spend money on your cat . . . well. You pick up the out-of-place bag and balance it like a saddle over one shoulder—a cowboy with no horse.

The coast is clear at the end of the aisle. You look both ways and figure the distance between the poultry coolers to your left and the wine display to the right and around the corner. Anne will take a few minutes trying to find a wine suitable enough (why doesn't she just go to the liquor store?) and Hal, well, you don't know what Hal knows about meats. With cat food balanced on your left shoulder and your basket of paste, pasta, and antacid in the same hand, you stride over to where Hal seems to be musing over an array of chicken and turkey cutlets.

On closer examination, you see that he is even fitter than you first thought. He has veiny arms and broader shoulders than his loose polo shirt reveals. Your legs seem better than his, but you never can tell. You're ashamed of doing it, but you wonder what he's like in bed with Anne. You wonder how their sex compares to the sex you used to have. *And often*, you reassure yourself.

You stride right up beside him (you are bold!) and from directly in front of him you pick a shrink-wrapped package of boneless, skinless chicken breasts. Your blood is making too much noise in your body, and you feel the sweat on the back of your neck again. No turning back. You hold the chicken up in your free hand like a prize. "Best for cutlets," you say, trying to listen for the approach of the squeaky wheel from behind you.

He nods his head. "I like to marinate them in citrus and garlic for a while, then grill them."

You smile and nod back, just two guys chatting about chicken. You could be anything to this guy, you realize. You could be a C.P.A. or a Protestant or a gym teacher for all he knows. You could be his wife's ex-husband. Your mouth feels stretched, and you realize you're still smiling.

He smiles back. "Hot out there, isn't it?" you say, raising your chin to indicate the front of the store, the parking lot, the world outside.

"Sure is," he answers. "That's why I don't mind being in here today." He picks out a package of four chicken breasts. He hasn't said anything about the Pet Fancy resting on your shoulder. You're just another guy who has a cat with expensive tastes.

"Gotta go find the wife," he says, grinning, as he walks around you.

You have the sudden urge to be this man's best friend, to watch football games with him and hash over old times. And maybe your ex could make some dip or a cheese plate, and you could all laugh about what a funny old world it is you live in. You drop the chicken back in the meat cooler and say, "Yeah, me too."

Somewhere along the way to the register, you lose your basket. Maybe in

Health and Beauty Aids. You don't remember putting it down, but it's gone. You decide to hell with it. The Pet Fancy is still on your shoulder, the weight of the real liver bits holding the bag steady. You enter the express line and are suddenly anxious, eager to leave this store. The clerk, a pimply-faced adolescent, has trouble understanding what you are saying about the cat food.

"Look," you repeat, "I want to pay for this cat food now, and then I want you to give it to a woman—her name is Anne." You describe her, remembering her face clearly as you do. "She'll be buying some wine, probably a Merlot, and some chicken. Oh yeah, her shopping cart has got a really noisy wheel."

The clerk looks dubious. "I'd better get the manager," he says.

You hear the squeaky wheel coming toward the registers from the direction of the produce bins. You take a twenty-dollar bill from your wallet and thrust it at the kid. "Look," you say, as if it explains everything, "she's my ex-wife." This last statement seems to clarify some puzzle in the clerk's head because he shoves your money into the chest pocket of his yellow jacket and adheres a PAID sticker to the bag of cat food.

"I'll take care of it, sir," he stage whispers, nodding with complicity.

Outside, the heat is staggering. Three teenage boys wearing baggy corduroy pants are smoking cigarettes and flicking the butts at the cars leaving the parking lot. You want to smack them all just for wearing pants in heat like this. You want to make them sweep up every cigarette butt from here to D.C.

You get in the car and head out past the store windows. There, just exiting the store, is Anne, the bag of Pet Fancy hugged to her chest. She is looking in every direction. She holds the cat food with one hand and shields her eyes with the other. You pass right by her in your car, and she makes a hand motion that could be a wave or a brushing aside of her bangs. You do not slow to find out.

A cigarette butt hits your windshield as you leave.