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Eclipse

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CHRIS OFFUTT

ECLIPSE

Five years into marital bliss, I came home from a Saturday run to the hardware store, the third such trip of the day in service to a broken shower. Household repairs seemed simple at first, but I always wound up frustrated at how long a thirty-minute job turned out to actually be. Lucky for me the hardware store was close, or I'd probably never finish any home project.

I entered the house and smelled baking. In the kitchen, tiny flakes of flour hung in the air as if suspended by invisible strands. A tapered French rolling pin lay on the counter. Carol was wearing my favorite jeans and a sexy blouse. Belted to her waist was a harness from which protruded a large and very lifelike black dildo.

It swayed in the afternoon light slicing through the kitchen window, a fierce faux penis composed of fancy plastic. Why, I wondered, did the color black always seem to flare white in the sun? Then I wondered why I was wondering about the physics of light instead of the obvious. I had no idea why she wore it, where it had come from, what she fathomed as to its purpose. My first thought was, it's way bigger than my penis. I mean, way.

Baking was like doing math in your head—it required a specific and prolonged focus, and I knew Carol resented interruption. I decided to wait until later to mention the dildo. Hopefully, she'd bring up the subject herself.

"Fresh scones in half an hour," she said in a merry way.

"Cool," I said. "Did you get the mail?"

"On the table, hon. The usual bills and offers. Nothing of interest."

"I haven't gotten a personal letter in five years."

"Internet," she said. "That's why the price of stamps is going up so fast."

I picked up the junk mail and pretended to look it over while actually examining the contraption fastened to my wife. One strap wrapped her waist and two encircled her thighs, all made of thick leather with silver buckles. They were cinched tight, nicely framing her lovely bottom.

We're in our thirties, own our own home, no pets, no kids, good jobs. Both of us grew up in the hills of Kentucky and moved to Covington, where we met and married. Our sex life was orderly and regular. The sole offbeat element was her occasional interest in semi-public sex, which boiled down to swift and awkward couplings in parking garages. We were never caught.

THE IOWA REVIEW

The only thing she ever refused was administering oral sex while I watched Internet porn. She said she couldn't fit under the desk, so I offered to move the laptop to bed. Too much trouble, she'd told me. I knew that wasn't the reason, but I accepted her refusal. Sometimes I got drunk at night and watched porn, and she'd never said a word about it.

I went upstairs and stood in the old-time high-walled tub that had been outfitted with the armature for an external shower. Four hours ago, I'd put a fitted O-ring on backwards, then couldn't understand why the nozzle continued to leak. By the time I figured it out, I'd already spent forty dollars on materials that weren't necessary. I hoped she didn't want to stick that thing in me. Maybe she wanted to sleep with a black man. Maybe she wanted to have sex with a woman. Maybe she already had a girlfriend and they swapped roles. I quickly imagined Carol on the receiving end of the dildo, bent over the kitchen counter, her handprints stenciling the flour. The woman behind my wife was tall and strong and blonde, her skin the color of prison pallor, wearing a leather corset that presented her voluminous bosom like a knick-knack shelf. I put the O-ring in correctly and stepped out of the shower. It worked fine.

I gathered my tools, hoping I'd hallucinated the entire dildo. I have never imbibed a street-hallucinogen or had religious visions. With any luck it was merely an unprecedented attack of hypoglycemia. Eating a cookie would wipe out all traces of the strange protuberance.

Carol was washing the dishes, standing at a slight remove from the sink to accommodate her belted-on acquisition.

"Shower's done," I said.

"Scones are ready," she said.

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"Not really," she said. "I'm ready for that shower."

"Uh-huh. I'll be in the garden."

As I walked by, she shifted her stance and I heard the dull thump of the dildo hit the cabinet door below the sink.

Outside, the twilight sky was glazed with the sheen of passing cloud. A robin flew by holding a twig in its beak. The early March earth emitted a few damp scents from the pale green shoots of grass. I sat in a low beach chair to contemplate my rock garden composed of stones I'd pulled from muddy sockets in a creek bank. My goal was clarity of thought. I had no idea what Carol was up to—seldom ever had, to be honest—and mainly just hoped

she'd be nice to me. She was clearly dissatisfied with our marriage. The fault was no doubt mine, all mine.

A cheerful sparrow called from the neighbor's stand of beech. I inhaled deeply, seeking serenity through detachment, concentrating on my breath. I imagined the new air sliding down slender tubes along my limbs, encircling the pockets of stress and carrying them away. My body relaxed. A singular part of me floated into the air, observing myself in the chair. From farther up I could see the green shingles of the peaked roof, the blocked chimney of an old oil furnace, and the plumbing flue. I floated higher. The house appeared far below, bordered by a fence, the alley, a gray street, and the entire block in the middle of an interlocking grid. I was living in the midst of geometry. My consciousness abruptly returned to my body.

I stood and kicked over the nearest pile of rocks. My meditation had revealed to me the futility of the practice. I stomped my garden into what it truly was—a bunch of rocks strewn about the surface of earth. The dropping sun slid over the rooftops, tinting the sky's edge red, draping chill along the ground. Dusk was the passage between day and night, a portal for the color of air, and I stood in its gray doorway. It was time to confront my wife.

The kitchen sparkled—steel sink wiped dry, floor swept, dishes stashed. The counter held scones tucked into Ziploc bags.

Carol was in the living room, sitting in her pale pink recliner, glass of white wine at hand, three books opened to various spots. She'd showered and changed clothes. Her hair was damp. She was knitting. The dildo rose and fell in tandem with her breathing.

"Hi, love," she said. "Almost done with this sock for you. It's bamboo."

She held up a tangled skein, four slender needles, and half a green sock.

"Bamboo?" I said. "Shouldn't it be more of a dark green?"

"Not the color. The yarn is made of bamboo. Tomorrow you can try this on."

"Okay," I said. "Can we talk about this?"

"What?" she said. "You don't like the color?"

"No, I love the color. And I love that you knit me socks. I love wearing them and I love seeing the expression on people's faces when I say my wife made them. Every man wants that. But I'm talking about something else." I pointed at the contraption rising from her middle. "That," I said.

"Oh, of course." She adjusted her glasses and looked at me. "I ordered it online."

Her smooth-planed face held her signature combination of aloof patience and flat affect. I wondered how many minutes might pass before she began talking. Sometimes getting info from her was less like pulling teeth and more like killing a dentist. Silence was often the best approach.

"It wasn't expensive," she said. "You buy comic books."

Pointing out that "graphic novels" is the correct term would be picking a fight. I knew the invisible laws, unvoiced rules, and clandestine methods of ambush. If I weren't careful, Carol would get angry, then claim it was due to my tone. The tactic was brilliant—impossible to defend, since tone was open to interpretation. I had to be wary.

"Remember," I said, "when I quit smoking, but I always told you when I bummed one off a stranger?"

She nodded.

"And you appreciated that, right?"

She nodded again.

"Because," I said, "I wasn't trying to hide anything."

"I'm not trying to hide this," she said.

"I know. And I appreciate that. I really do."

"Well," she said. "If there's nothing else, I want to finish this row."

"I wish talking to me was more important than your knitting."

"Please don't use that tone."

"All right, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything. I just think we need to talk. But go ahead with your row."

"No, it can wait."

I nodded ruefully. There it was, the verbal snare that irritated me to no end: she asked for something, I agreed, then she didn't want it. Temporarily abandoning her yarn was the highest sacrifice she could make. Next was setting aside sudoku. When those books started piling up by her chair, I knew trouble was coming. I tried to head it off by throwing them away. Maybe this strapped-on chunk of plastic was the new sudoku.

"Look," I said. "I'm mishandling things. I'm just confused is all. I'm not sure what's going on."

"Nothing. Just knitting in the library."

"You're wearing a dildo and I wondered why."

"It's not a dildo. It's a gel-penis."

"Okay," I said. "Like graphic novels aren't comic books."

She gave me a hard look.

“You have your rocks and Internet porn. I have my knitting and gel-penis.”
“I just kicked my rocks all over hell and back.”

She looked at her knitting. I knew that if I didn't speak, she'd pick it up and begin clicking needles.

“Will you please tell me about your gel-penis.”

“This isn't the top of the line, you know. There are nicer ones made of glass that you put in a microwave. Some are cast from a porn star. But this is simple, classic. Plus it's dishwasher safe.”

I sat in my La-Z-Boy chair facing her, cranked the handle to tip backwards, and stared at the ceiling. A flat white plane of blank. Nothingness. Detaching from a ceiling was easy; gravity did most of the work.

“Are you a lesbian?” I said.

“Of course not,” she said. “Is that what you're worried about?”

“Sort of, yeah,” I said. “And maybe you'll want to use it on me.”

She blinked twice, her expression deepening to pure bewilderment. Her laughter was like a chef wielding a knife—precisely dicing the silence to bits.

“Are you...” I said. “I mean am I... Are you not getting what you want from me. In bed?”

Her laughter halted like a soundproof door slammed shut.

“This is about me,” she said. “Not you. I mean it. I'm going through something. It feels profound. You know how every seven years you're supposed to have a whole new set of cells in your body. Even your skin is new.”

“You look the same to me,” I said. “Except for, you know.”

“It's like a new personal era.”

“Yeah, it's called the seven-year itch. It means you want to have an affair.”

“You're sick.”

“No,” I said. “I'm the same guy I was who fixed the shower all day. You're the one in the new era of dildo. What do you expect me to say? Oil it up, honey! Turn me into your prison bitch. Jesus Christ, Carol. What do you want?”

“What do I want?” she said. “That's the first time you've asked me that in over a year. Thank you.”

“You're very fucking welcome.”

We stared at each other, our quick anger already smoldering its way out like a campfire dwindling beneath kicked dirt. Everything felt bleak and forlorn. I hated tension in the house. I wanted to blame her, blame the dildo, blame myself. Carol was probably right that I hadn't inquired about her

desires, but I couldn't recall her asking about mine, either. Bringing that up wouldn't help. We were at some kind of marital stalemate, a lull. Maybe we had been for a while. Maybe we were all washed up.

"Please tell me what you want," I said.

"Two things. One is for you to listen more carefully."

"All right. Sure. That's easy. What's the other thing?"

"I can't say. I'm embarrassed."

"Well, write it down then. Dispatch a goddamn passenger pigeon."

"They're extinct," she said.

"They are?"

"Yeah," she said. "Since the 1920s. Flocks used to be three miles long in the air. Billions of them."

"What happened, avian flu?"

"Hah-hah. No. People ate them."

"To extinction?"

She nodded. Our brief foray into bird history had caused me to forget the dildo, which had renewed its slight bobbing.

"Honey," I said. "Tell me. I'm open to whatever."

"All right," she said. "I'll try. Sometimes I think about you outside the window watching me. I'm lying on the couch. Touching myself. Today, I started thinking about that, except I'm, you know, using this, too."

"Using it how?"

"It comes off," she said pointedly.

"Sounds cool," I said. "Let me open a bottle of wine."

"And one other thing," she said.

I waited, nodding in what I hoped was an encouraging and supportive manner. Attentive. Listening.

"I might want to start smoking weed," she said.

"Tonight?"

"No," she said. "In general. My dad does. He has every day since getting back from Vietnam. Maybe it'll be good for me."

"I don't know where to get it. And I'm not asking your father."

"I'm just telling you. Since you asked. And are listening."

"Thanks," I said. "I mean it. I'm glad you told me. I'm going to open that wine now."

In the kitchen I struggled with a bottle of eleven-dollar red. I hadn't set the corkscrew straight, and when I finally got it poured, small pieces of cork

were floating in my glass. Somehow this seemed to reflect my life. I wasn't exactly sure how, but it felt that way, like a stupid metaphor in a stupid song. Zen had failed me and now alcohol was, too. Maybe I was just failing myself.

I poured a glass and gulped it, then refilled it and carried Carol's bottle of white to the library. We sipped while she knitted and I fretted. Maybe the dildo would be no more than a passing fancy, like her obsession with making tile mosaics a few years ago, scrapbooking, crossword puzzles, growing a doomed orchid, and now knitting. I poured another glass. Her dildo was a bump in the road, a hurdle to hop. I couldn't over-think it, transform a factory-made piece of plastic into a symbol of intangible conflict. Besides, she tolerated without comment my having once played World of Warcraft for thirty-six hours straight, mail-ordering various steampunk taxidermy, and a fascination with vintage girly calendars.

"It's full dark," I said. "You still up for your voyeurism deal?"

"It's not really that," she said.

"Whatever you call it, I'm game."

"If you want me to, yes."

"Please don't do that," I said. "This is about you, not me."

"You mean you don't want to?"

"I said I would. Up to you."

She looked at me demurely. I knew she wouldn't verbalize an answer, and after a minute she set aside her knitting, stood, and walked to the couch.

"I guess you'll need some rearranging time?" I said.

She nodded again, her eyes gleaming with gratitude. I went to the kitchen for a couple of scones, then carried the bottle and glass outside. I felt like a good husband—responsible, reasonable, proud of indulging my lovely wife.

The spring air retained both the day's heat and the fading chill of winter. I loved the twining seasons of night: a scattering of stars to the east, a dark slab of cloud in the west, a full moon low on the horizon. A car sped by, a pizza delivery sign bolted to the roof. I heard a dog barking, then an answering howl. The neighborhood was mostly families, younger people fresh out of the starter home. Our house was a hundred sixty years old—three rows of red brick with deep window seats, original radiator heat—a historic home. People envied our life, admired her flowers, my stones, our easy way with each other. We were regularly invited to backyard barbecues and dinner parties. Carol said people considered us a real cool couple.

I suddenly wanted out, away from Covington, job, and wife. I wanted to be in Mexico where I'd look at pretty pastel walls and ancient murals and learn Spanish and have a girlfriend and eat tacos and wear white shirts and drink tequila and smoke that good Mexican dope, then quit when my girlfriend gets pregnant and I'd marry her, and no one in my family would come to the wedding except my estranged sister who's a big hit with my new wife's brothers by drunkenly out-shooting them with a pistol in an offhanded fashion, which gets the attention of a local bandit she falls in with and disappears for three months until sending me a barely legible note saying she's in jail and will I help. And I do. I help my sister. I stick by family. I'll stick by Carol.

All that ran through my head in about five seconds. I wondered if other people thought about running away and starting fresh. After a while, I figured Carol had had enough time to start doing whatever she had in mind. I stood in the narrow front yard beside the tendrils of forsythia and leaned close to the window for a tentative peek. Carol sprawled on the couch, her jeans off, shirt unbuttoned, no glasses. A single reading lamp transformed her skin to satin. Her eyes were shut, her mouth open slightly. She held the dildo in one small hand, brushing it lightly along her thighs. I watched, entranced by her prone dance, my eyes dry from not blinking. She was teasing herself but me as well. I wondered how aware she was of my presence.

I watched for quite a while, part of me appalled, another part aroused, still another part vaguely wondering if this whole thing was a jealous response to my habit of Internet porn. I knew what Carol would say if I mentioned that. She'd accuse me of hijacking her feelings. As I watched, I realized how beautiful she was. She kept in shape. Her thighs were strong, her belly flat, her breasts firm. I could see her face in profile, mouth open, eyes closed. I'd never seen that angle of her during sex and I liked it.

So focused was I on my wife that I didn't hear anything else until a man behind me spoke.

"Sir, please step away from the window and turn around."

I held my body very still in case the man was talking to someone else.

"Sir," he said, "step away from the window."

I obeyed, moving slowly, turning in the darkness to face a police officer standing in my yard. He held a flashlight in his left hand. It had been aimed at the ground but now he lifted its beam to my face, temporarily blinding me.

"Identification," he said.

I handed him my driver's license. He shifted the flashlight to check my ID, and as my eyes readjusted, I got a look at him. He was late forties, a short African-American going soft in the middle.

"This is my house," I said. "My address is on there, too."

He handed my license back. He had a big, open face—except for the eyes, which focused sharp on me while simultaneously probing the yard, the door, the shadows, evaluating the possibility of threat or malfeasance. I took a few steps away from the window so he wouldn't see inside. I hoped he'd move with me, but he stayed where he was.

"Mr. Riddle, we got a complaint of a Peeping Tom."

It was one of those statements that pass as a question, an inducement to fill the void of silence. I'd been cohabiting with that trait long enough to steer clear.

"I didn't see anyone suspicious," I said.

"The call was for this house."

"Maybe I scared him off."

"Or maybe it was you," he said.

136 I drifted farther from the window. Jonquil sprouts crunched beneath my feet.

"Well," I said, "is there a law against looking in my own house?"

"If you rent out any part of it, yes."

"It's a single-family home. Just my wife and me."

Someone walked a dog across the street. I recognized the dog but not the person. That seemed significant. A terrible thought scalded my mind.

"My wife," I said, "she didn't make the call, did she?"

"Is there any reason she'd want the police?"

"Uh, no."

"Mr. Riddle," he said. "I think it's time I looked in that window."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"I understand," he said. "But I need to double-check things here for an Incident Report. You know how it is. Paperwork."

He took four steps and peered inside. I joined him. Carol had one leg on the back of the couch, her other foot on the floor. She was quite exposed. Her head was thrown back, her face turned away from the light. She arched her back, the fingers of one hand clenching the upholstery. Her thighs were trembling. She was moving the dildo rapidly. It was a stark image, strange and stimulating, intimate and embarrassing, vaguely infuriating.

I turned quickly away, my face pounding with shame that felt toxic, as if it could poison the yard. Soundlessly, the cop moved beside me.

"Your wife?" he said.

"Yes, but it's not what you think. Carol and I are having... issues."

"Issues. That's the same thing my wife says. My grandfather said he never argued with his wife. He said, 'I just dicker.' Get it."

"Yeah," I said. "It's not that funny."

"No, I suppose not. He was married three times. He said he let his wives do all the deciding except for the hard ones. I asked him what constituted a hard one. He said he didn't know; one had never come up. That right there's some old guy wisdom."

"Well, I need young guy wisdom. Got any?"

"I work the night shift," he said. "Keeps a lot of peace at home."

We stood there a minute. I wondered what his wife was like, what their issues were. Each slept while the other worked. They both got plenty of bed to sprawl in. Maybe the time apart made them glad to see each other. Or maybe when they did fight, one or the other was too tired to argue.

I hoped he didn't plan on arresting me for drinking. Maybe the front yard counted as public. Mainly I just wanted him to not look in the window again.

"You want a scone," I said.

He looked at me. Behind him a streetlight flickered, momentarily drawing his attention.

"It always does that," I said. "Come on, have a scone. They're fresh."

I offered him the Ziploc bag, and after a second he slipped the flashlight through the metal ring on his belt. I broke a scone in two and gave him half.

"Pretty good," he said. "Thanks. Are you a baker?"

"No," I said. "You don't seem like the usual kind of cop."

"I'm not. I'm fourth-generation law enforcement. My father was the first officer to patrol white neighborhoods in Covington."

"I never saw you around here before," I said.

"Budget cuts. We all have a bigger area. I inherited this neighborhood."

"My wife—"

He lifted his hand as if to stop me from talking, but I didn't. I told him everything, all of it, each humiliating detail. I talked without thinking or drinking wine. I must have breathed but it didn't seem so. He said nothing, not a grunt or nod of sympathy. There was nothing on his face, no judgment,

blame, or criticism. He just looked at me and listened—precisely what Carol wanted from me. I laid it all out.

When I finished, I felt depleted, like a collapsed zeppelin. After a few minutes of silence, the cop spoke.

“How old is she? Mid-thirties?”

“Thirty-five on the button.”

“Women get funny at that age.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just take a funny turn,” he said. “Sometimes a pet helps.”

“She’s allergic.”

“For men it’s age fifty. Then they start acting out. Something you got to look forward to.”

“And you, too.”

“I’m forty-nine,” he said. “It might already be started.”

Events had begun to overwhelm me. This morning had seen a dusting of snow, wispy drifts gone by noon, the overlap of winter and spring. I stared at the sky, smelling the thick air, the softened earth beneath my feet.

138 “I get worried,” I said, “that there’s something wrong with her. That it’ll get worse and I won’t know what to do, how to stop it. Or help her.”

“Women aren’t like a broken doorknob. You can’t just take her apart and fix her. My experience, they don’t like it if you even try.”

“I spent all day fixing the shower and came home to this. She might be crazy.”

“They talk about feelings,” he said. “Men talk about thoughts. But both sides believe their way is the most important.”

“Maybe we’re the crazy ones,” I said.

“Naw,” he said. “They think we’re dumb and we think they’re nuts. You don’t have to listen to your wife, you just have to give her the impression that she was heard.”

“Isn’t that like lying?”

“They do it, too. A peacekeeping white lie.”

A slow breeze brushed my face and rattled the budding maple branches overhead.

“There’s another thing,” I said.

He looked at me as if he could wait patiently forever.

“It’s the color,” I said. “The thing she’s got. You think there’s anything to it being black?”

His impassive expression shifted to that of a kid as he began to laugh. I started laughing, too. We stood there until things subsided into sporadic chuckles. Beyond the roofline, the moon was full and shockingly bright orange. The upper right section was black, like a chomped bite ripped away.

“Wow,” I said. “Look at that.”

“It’s an eclipse,” the cop said. “They happen twice a year. The penumbra phase is next.”

“You a planet hunter, or whatever they’re called?”

“No. Twenty-two years working nights, I’ve learned a lot about what happens in the sky. And what happens on the ground, too. There’s a relationship, you know, between up there and down here.”

“I’m not religious that way.”

“I’m not talking about God,” he said. “I mean the actual physical activity in the sky. In the old days people got scared of an eclipse. They thought it was the end of the world. The word ‘eclipse’ is Greek and means ‘abandoned.’ You need to think about that.”

“About what?”

“Twice a year the moon looks like it’s abandoning us. But it’s only for a little while. Then the moon comes back same as ever. Like nothing ever happened. Because nothing really did. Earth and moon crossed paths at a distance but they continue moving together. They’re linked forever.”

“Nothing happened.”

“That’s right. During an eclipse, all the stars glow a little brighter. That’s what you have to look at.”

He was right. The Milky Way’s curved smear was more visible, its contents glittering like beads of ice. Thousands of stars filled the darker air, throbbing like a pulse to the sky. A meteorite cut the sky like a rip in the night. I stared at the blackest parts, and the stars appeared to glow sharper, reminding me of my garden, the stones randomly kicked about. I resolved to let them be. I’d concentrate on the black soil and let the rocks emerge. Next time I found a good one, I’d close my eyes and toss it into the dark dirt.

I offered him my glass of wine. He lifted it in a toast to the sky, took a drink, and passed it back. We stood in silence for a long time, drinking wine, watching as the moon disintegrated and then began its gradual return.