

Cooling and Heating

By Dara Cunningham

I drift to sleep by the seventh inning, the hum of the air conditioner pleasantly drowning out the commentator. I am content to rest my head against the soft cotton of his shirt and breathe in his cleanness. He never wears cologne and proudly smells only of soap and fabric softener. I love the coolness of the room, and count my blessings that he doesn't like the summer heat and prefers cold air bursting through the vents.

I had a father who barked over using the air conditioner even on the hottest of days. Not that we didn't use it, we just flipped the switches ten minutes before he came home. In the winter, we'd have to turn down the heat. There was always something to hide.

Shut off the TV before he gets home.

Put away those toys before he gets home.

Turn down that music before he gets home.

Clean up that mess before he gets home.

Don't let him see you wearing that; change your clothes before he gets home.

Yes, in the ten minutes before my father got home we behaved as though our house was a speakeasy, frantically turning over the tables before the vice squad burst inside.

I hated that fear. If we failed and an infraction was noticed, the repercussions would involve screaming, slamming of doors and shedding of tears. Not abusive, all perfectly legal turmoil, but damaging just the same.

I grew up always being afraid. I could be comfortable and joyful only in my father's absence. Splurges or celebrations had to be kept secret.

I wondered why anyone would want to be married if you had to live that way, and vowed from age eight to remain single forever.

Yet there are things I keep from him, like how much I spend to get my hair colored at the salon with the fancy French name. I don't use a credit card anymore, because I fear his reaction will not be pretty, and I refuse to defend my right to good hair.

I don't let him know that at work I still use Riley as my signature, and that I get a twinge every time I add the hyphen and his last name.

I don't let him know that at least once a week I walk by my old building and gaze wistfully up at the lights on in the kitchen window, wondering who's moved in.

A particularly obnoxious commercial jingle jars me, but I don't fully wake up. I hover for a few minutes in blissful, somnolent limbo.

"The game is over," he says. He clicks the remote, and the flickering screen shrinks to black.

"Okay," I say, "I'll get going. You'll drive me home, won't you?"

"What?" he laughs, but the laugh is troubled. "You are home."

"I am?"

"Yes. You live here. We're married, remember?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was dreaming it was last summer, and you were getting ready to ..."

I blink, now wide awake and afraid I've said something hurtful.

"Don't you ever forget?" I ask. "Don't you wake up sometimes, look at me and think, 'what is she doing here?'"

"No," he lies.

He thinks for a minute.

"Do you miss the way it was?"

"No," I lie.

"Good."

He squeezes my hand and leads me into the bedroom.

We pull back the comforter and I slide into bed. He is silent next to me, never tosses, turns or snores. He has told me I am restless, and that I occasionally grind my teeth.

I want to flip on the lights, pick up a book or watch TV again. When I'm certain he's asleep I walk into the kitchen, pour a glass of wine and return to the sofa.

Sometime during the hours between midnight and dawn I hear the toilet flush and water running. His footsteps soon stop in front of me.

He calls me softly and strokes my hair.

"You have to stop doing this," he says.

"I know. I'm sorry."

He leans forward; a kiss lands on my temple.

I follow him back to bed. Before we lie down, he turns up the air conditioner, and I smile to myself.

I listen to his slow, steady breathing. I like the shadow of his shoulders, and his plush, dark hair sinking into the pillow.

I close my eyes, and I don't miss my old apartment.

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