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# COLD FUSION

KEREN TOLEDANO

## John flags down the waitress.

"What is it, babe?" asks Emma.

*Don't look. Don't look.*

"Something wrong with your omelet?"

*My omelet is fine, you needy—*

She slides her plate his way. "Here," she says, "you can finish my eggs."

He has no choice but to lift his head. Her eyes smother him from across the table.

"Just a refill," he says, and looks again for the waitress.

It isn't that John doesn't find Emma pretty. She may be the prettiest woman he's been with. Elegant and tall, with long, dark hair skimming narrow shoulders. She was a ballerina when she was a girl, standing in the back and waving a flower. *I was never good enough for the lead*, she said. And he found that disgraceful, the idea of a corps, a body to hold up the other dancers.

Last week, they were discussing an article in the *Boston Globe* about the dangers of social networking. "Our society," wrote the author, "is addicted to feedback—nods, pokes, winks, and jabs—a pack of junkies scrambling for the needle." They were sharing a bottle of wine in his apartment and she was getting tipsy, creeping her body toward his on the floor.

"We have this idea we're being followed," said John, "and we like it. We beg for it. The worst part is it's just a screen full of pixels."

And do you know what she did? Do you know what she said?

She leaned over and licked his ear like a puppy. "I'd follow your ass to Timbuktu," she sighed.

And he sighed too, but for a different reason.

The waitress fills his mug with steaming hot coffee. John takes a long sip and closes his eyes. He likes how it burns, how the roof of his mouth forms these sharp little ribs. It happens so quickly. He wants to pour the coffee down Emma's throat. As a scientist, it is his way, to test an object and gauge its reaction. He's never poured scalding liquid in her mouth, but he has smacked her ass and called it flabby. He's pressed her stomach when it was full, and kicked the back of her knee while she was walking. Most of the time, she just laughs it off. *You're such a kid*, she grins at him.

In return, she offers herself in parts: her eyes, her mouth, her poached egg breakfast. Her heart she keeps so she can lure John in, one chamber at a time, like the stomach of a cow.

He shakes his head to clear it. Did he really order this blunted thing? *No bullshit, no games, just a person to walk with*. What a joke. No edge. No serrations. It isn't that he wants to break her heart, but the thought excites him. He wants to throw her down and tear off her dress, to take her on the food-splattered table. He smiles as he pictures his final assault, letting the bill flutter down to her chest.

Last night, he sat up in bed watching Emma's chest go up and down like a piston. The regular cadence robbed John of his breath. He pinched her side and the rhythm jumped. But then that became the new rhythm, and five minutes later

he pinched her again. Each time he did, her body slid closer to him in her sleep.

He pops three antacid with a mouthful of coffee.

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### John is at home now, drinking watered-down

whiskey by the open window. The spring air smells like the Callery Pear, those trees that reek of semen and chlorine. The scent makes him horny. He types the letter *R* into his phone. He has heard that Rebecca is newly single.

They dated last year for three wild months, screwing in forbidden places—the quad, the Starbucks, the bathrooms of bars. Once he slid his hand up her skirt at a film. She slammed her knees shut and shattered his finger.

The last time he saw Rebecca she was standing on a chair, dancing to some old-school rap. *Bring tha muthafuckin' ruckus. Bring tha muthafuckin' ruckus.* She ran outside ahead of him. He found her leaning against a wall, sucking on a Viceroy without any filter.

She ran her teeth along his neck. "I'm going back to my ex," she said.

That night, John posted the dating profile. *No games. No bullshit.* And Emma answered.

So Rebecca is single. And John thinks he deserves another go. He says to himself, *I need to hit that again.* He wonders if he really wants to hit her. But no. Rebecca he wants to see up on that chair, her kohl-rimmed eyes searing holes in his skin.

Before bed, he reaches for another antacid. He shouldn't have taken that coffee black. He goes into the bathroom and finds something sordid. Emma has left her mouth on the mirror.

Beneath the lipstick, she has scribbled a note.

*A kiss for my baby. Have a glorious day.*

The first part only makes him nauseous. The second makes him want to smash his head into the glass.

*Glorious, indeed.*

He rubs it off with the heel of his palm.

"There's just something missing," he had said at the diner, after the eggs and that acid brew. "Why don't we scale it back to friends?" It was a horrible thing to ask, maybe worse than the rejection.

But Emma didn't make a scene. Her cheeks got red and her eyes pooled tears, then she just shrugged and shook her head. When she stood up, her bag got caught on the table. She tugged at the strap like she was wrestling a fish.

"Let me walk you," he said.

She was silent the whole way, though he wished she would speak. He wanted her to curse him, to punch his arm, to make her neighbors stare wide-eyed at him. He wanted them to think he was some kind of brute. If they had, he might have felt something. Not bad. Maybe sad?

Maybe.

But she didn't say a word.

He left her standing on the steps of her house, a lovely old saltbox with green window trim. She lives in the attic below the gable. John thinks of Emma attached to the house, a vestigial piece, an appendix or tail. He never went inside when she invited him. They spent their time in his apartment.

And what had the time been? Four or five months? But somehow it had felt like more.

As he walked down the street, Emma yelled to him, "Call me!"

But he didn't turn.

And this, he feels, was right and honest.

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### John is back with Rebecca now, another three

months for a total of six. She says the first three never counted. But John counts them. And when he does, she rolls her eyes. Life with Rebecca is a constant struggle. She hates his shoes and the smell of his cologne. They fight about wars and religion and fracking. They fight on the street and when lying in bed. It always ends in sex. He has started to fight with her just to get laid, buying real milk instead of soy milk, picking out movies with flat female leads. They fight till they crash and then come back apart. Rebecca isn't pretty, exactly. But something about her is so arousing that John can feel his pores expand, like a compound within him is rising to meet her. She is visibly askew, one eye a little larger, a bump on the bridge of her aquiline nose. Her blond hair is always a ball of frizz. The thought of Rebecca gives John an erection.



"Babe," she says this Monday morning, "if you don't wash the dishes, I'm gonna fuck Marcus."

Marcus is the man she left John for last year. She uses him often as bait or as a threat. And John always bites. He opens his mouth, lets the hook slip in, and feels the blood begin to pour.

"Oh, come on," he says, winking over his shoulder. "You know you love cleaning up after me. It's in your bones."

His words take their intended effect. Rebecca spins through rooms, throwing socks out of drawers and clothes out of closets. He touches himself and finds he is already hard. He catches her with his goldfish in hand, holding the bowl aloft like a statue.

"I'll do it," she smirks. "I'll flush the damn thing."

He grabs the bowl and sets it down. He swipes her legs and she crashes to the steps.

When he shoves his head between her thighs, her neck bends back and her mouth slings open.

She could box his ears with a snap of her knees. All he wants is to come inside her.

John could die he is so happy. A PhD candidate at thirty-nine, dating a woman with sparks in her hair.

The only thing stable in his life is the house, the pretty white saltbox where Emma still lives. The curtains are drawn, but he sees her shape. Her shoulders are always slumped like she's reading. He imagines she reads only Jane Austen novels. Poor Emma, attached to that dying old house like a tail. He wonders if she still teaches at the preschool, a stifled artist cleaning snot and shit. When they were dating, he said it was sad that she gave up her painting. And she said that she hadn't, that she painted every day, which he would know if he ever came in.

Five months pass. Rebecca is overtaken by nausea. She blames it on her thesis, which she blames on him.

"There's nothing more sickening to an academic," she sniffs, "than seeing another being more productive."

She vomits in the trash can.

"Baby," John frowns, "just go to the doctor."

"Fuck you," she says, and kisses his head.

She goes to the drugstore instead of the clinic.

"I'm keeping the goddamn kid," she declares, as if he has already told her to abort it.

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### **Emma is always in the window these days. His**

son is five and Rebecca is thirty. That would make Emma thirty-seven. He walks with the kid past the house every day. It is clear that she has become a recluse.

When he passes the saltbox, it tugs at him, trying to pull him across the street. He passes it just to know he is stronger. When he looks at the attic, he longs for Rebecca.

She is still fucking Marcus, behind John's back but not in secret. She leaves him filthy trails of crumbs, socks in the hamper, condoms in the trash. But he won't say a thing. If he does, she will leave him.

As the child grows taller, Rebecca grows smaller. She is moving backward, away from them. It is mainly John who cares for the boy. He loves him completely but also with malice, not for him but his mother. He wonders if she didn't have the kid just to spite him. His brain has come to despise his body, how fast it still reacts to Rebecca's.

"Why don't we buy a house?" he asks. "They're selling the colonial on the corner."

"With what money?" she growls. "You're making a pittance, and my thesis is shit. I may have to drop it."

"I know, baby," he says. "I know." And he means both things—that her thesis is crap and that she should give up.

His words take their intended effect. She leaves the apartment and is gone for two days.

When she does come back, she smells like Marcus. John breathes in the scent on her neck as they fuck. The more he smells it, the more he wants her. She rolls him off right before he comes. By the time he is done, she is standing in the hallway.

He walks past the saltbox on a crisp fall day. It has been six years since that morning in the diner. He remembers the details, Emma's red flowered dress, and the loose black strands of hair falling into her eyes. He doesn't remember at all what he said. But he remembers the relief, how his lungs had expanded when he left her on the porch.

The shape in the window swings back and forth. Emma must be sitting in a rocking chair.

He pictures her body lashed to the arms. She tries to stand up, but her delicate spine has fused with the spindles.



He stares at the attic till his vision dissolves, the windows tilting up into Emma's eyes, a gash in the wood the long scar on her forehead. She told him about it on their very first date.

They were sloshed by then, resting their elbows on whiskey and peanuts. She had sliced her head on a makeshift bong. *It was my first high school party, she laughed, a little shyly. I'd never smoked pot, let alone from a beer can.*

When she finished the story, he kissed her and smiled. But secretly he thought her a little pathetic.

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**Years pass. Rebecca leaves him for Marcus. She breaks up with John over SMS. *U crash N2 walls just 2 feel U R feeling.***

What he feels is that his spleen is being torn out. He is angry. He is sad. He is sad that he doesn't feel much more than anger. He takes a razor and slices his thumb, watching the blood drain into the sink. He feels, his skin feels, but he does not.

He shaves his face and buzzes his head. He is pale and blank as a sheet of paper.

He looks for Rebecca inside the boy. And he finds her, in curly blond hair and uneven eyes. He does not see the pieces of himself, the small nose, the height, that the eyes, though her shape, are his pale blue. He never looks too deeply at his son. He turns when he calls, and he pats his shoulder. He provides him with food and water and a bed. He loves the boy, but he does not know him.

His life slips into a notch on a belt. *Wake up, feed the kid, teach class, come home, feed the kid, brush teeth, jerk off, go to bed.*

The only thing unstable in his life is the saltbox, aging now at a startling rate. Weeds grow out of the roof like hair, shingles dangle like loosened incisors. At night, the wind whines through the porch. It is sad he never called, that he never came inside. The shape in the attic doesn't rock anymore. It only stands and stares out the window.

When he passes the house now, he gets pins and needles. It's how he feels in the lab, when he catalyzes a chain reaction. He knows what's coming but his skin still pricks.

"What is it with you and that house?" asks the boy.

"You're, like, obsessed." He is eighteen now, and heading to college.

And John wants to tell him. There once was a girl who had offered him parts, but only so that she could trap him inside her. So he stayed across the street. And now the girl has merged with the house.

He manages to say, "Give a call from the road."

And the boy drives off. He wanted to stay back east for school, but John convinced him to go out west.

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**There is no relief anymore. Nothing can extinguish the fire in his gut. One month later, John makes an appointment.**

"You have an ulcer," the doctor says. "You're inches from bile leaking into your bloodstream."

He takes the long way home from the drugstore. Doubled over at the wheel, he feels ruptured and raw. Three blocks from his apartment, he hears the sirens.

He parks outside the saltbox and gets out of the car. As the gurney rolls past, he brushes the sheet with the back of his hand.

It is twenty years since he has touched her.

When the ambulance leaves, he stares up at the attic. The window is empty. The house no longer pulls on him. He feels as if he's been dropped from a height.

One week later, he returns to the house. He knew it would happen, that someone, a distant relative, or maybe a bank, would list it for sale in the local paper. He straightens his tie as he climbs to the porch. Raking his hand through his bristled hair, he catches his reflection in the first floor window. At fifty-seven, he is handsome still. He can tell by the way his students adore him. They laugh at his jokes and nod their heads. "Sup, John?" they ask as they pass him in the hall. He never lets them call him Mister.

He rings the bell and coughs into his palm. His ulcer knocks, though he takes his pills. It was the boy who did it, who called from out west and yelled at him. *I already have a deadbeat mom. The last thing I need is a dead-ass father.*

When she answers the door, his knees give out.

She doesn't recognize him at first, just scrunches her forehead and raises her eyes.



Then she says, "You," almost like a question. "I don't believe—" She smiles slightly and opens the door. "Come on in."

And this time, he does.

The bones of the house do not match its skin. It is the home of a traveler, a restless romantic. Nordic dolls and African masks, the books on the shelf spanning country and era. There's a photograph of children in descending size, a Matryoshka doll with its heads cracked open.

Emma looks lovelier than she did at the diner. She has put on weight and her cheeks are flushed. Her nose is peppered with a dash of freckles. He thinks of the tainted blood rushing through his body and he thinks that hers must be clear as a stream.

They take a seat on a lace-covered couch. She serves him tea from a china pot and offers him wafers from a rose-colored saucer.

"My grandmother could never sit still," she says. "Then Granddad died and she wouldn't leave the attic. She sat in that rocking chair fifteen years. Never let a soul fix the outside of the house."

She looks tasteful and tailored in a black pantsuit. Rebecca used to make fun of this type.

*Power whores, she called them. They think they're in charge. But men carved them out from the trunks of trees.*

He asks if she still lives in the saltbox.

Emma laughs sharply and tilts back her head. "Not for fifteen years," she says. She unwinds an elastic from her hair, letting it fall in dark waves to her shoulders. "I live in New York now. I spent five years in Berlin, two in Prague, three back in Boston, and now I'm in Chelsea. I own a gallery. No more time for my silly paintings."

"You're a nomad," says John. And his ulcer kicks because he never left Cambridge.

"Married?" he asks.

She tells him no, that it just never happened. Now she is dating a lovely man, forty-three to her fifty-one. She never wanted kids, so age doesn't matter. She thinks she might have been a very good mother. But the notion was never inscribed on her bones.

"That's strange," says John.

"It's only men who think that," Emma says. "There are a great many things I might have been good at." She blows on

her tea and puts it down without drinking. "I saw you a few times, when I came to visit Gran. You have a son."

He nods.

"Now *that* is strange," she smiles at the wall, "to mix yourself with another person."

John shoves his hand into his pocket. He doesn't know what he's reaching for. When he pulls it out, he's holding the ad he clipped from the paper.

She smiles briefly. "You don't want this place," she says. "And, anyway, a developer just closed."

"They're tearing it down?"

"This neighborhood has changed," Emma shrugs her narrow shoulders. "It's all young families now." She puts their cups back on the tray and rises slowly from the couch. "What do they want with a dusty old relic?"

John looks around the parlor, at the stacks of boxes, the cloth-wrapped squares he assumes are her paintings. He imagines a wrecking ball flattening the house. Then he imagines a different structure, tall and gray with glinting glass, a new place rising from the rubble of the old.

"Shame," he says. "They don't build them like they used to."

Emma shakes her head as she walks to the door. "I never felt at home here," she says.

She turns around and looks back at the staircase. "I moved out as soon as I saved enough money. It broke my heart to watch her wait for him."

She opens the front door and lets John pass.

He crosses the threshold and turns to face her.

"Emma," he says, "I really am—"

"Ancient history." She takes his hand and squeezes lightly, her blue eyes searing holes in his skin. When she drops his hand, it falls like a brick. "I never took you for sentimental," she smiles.

He takes a step toward her, his shoelace caught in a loosened porch board.

Emma bends down and untangles the string. "I think this old pile likes you," she grins.

She stands up and brushes her hair from her shoulders. "Take care," she says, and closes the door.

A wave of acid rises up in his throat. He reaches for his pills but he doesn't take them.

And this, he feels, is right and honest. **KT**



