

Ambata Kazi-Nance

Apples and Oranges

I knew something was up when I opened the front door and found my wife, May, standing just a few steps away from the threshold clutching a pale blue shawl over her bare arms, her face drawn and pale. Usually by the time I came home she was in a frenzy of activity, whirling like a dervish through the kitchen, or elbow deep in dirt in the garden, always startled by my appearance. “Is it six o’clock already?” she’d say, eyes wide and face flushed, giving me a quick kiss before turning back to her task.

Before I could even fully gather her presence at the door and greet her with a proper salaams, she had lifted my bag off my shoulder and set it down on the floor and was pulling me towards the living room. I tripped on the carpet trying to slip my brown leather loafers off and couldn’t believe she didn’t notice I still had them on. Shoes on the carpet was anathema for May; she even kept a little basket of disposable paper slippers for when delivery guys or repairmen had to come to the house. I had a brief, delicious fantasy that she was going to throw me on the couch and jump on top of me and announce she was pregnant. Then she sat me down on the couch and took my hand and I immediately thought she was going to tell me she had made a mistake and she didn’t really love me and she wanted a divorce. What can I say—we’d only been married ten months, and I was an insecure man.

“Dr. Ferris called me this morning,” she said.

My brain started running like a hamster trying to remember who Dr. Ferris was. Her thesis director? Her favorite linguistics professor, the really old guy with the Santa Claus beard and Velcro-strapped shoes? Or that Victorian literature professor she couldn’t stand who’d asked her what her “first language” was?

“Actually it was her nurse, Jane,” said May.

Okay so it was a *doctor* doctor. It was then I noticed May wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes were fixed on a spot on her left knee. I had trouble swallowing. She squeezed her eyes shut and spoke.

“There’s something I’ve been keeping from you, Na’eem. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to worry, but now I know and the thing is they found cancer in my ovaries.”

Everyone says when they hear bad news it feels like a punch in the guts, but for me it felt like a fist to the center of my head that then traveled through my brain, down my throat, and slammed down on my bladder. I thought for sure I had pissed the couch. A cloud of blinding white light moved over my eyes. I had to blink several times before I could look at May, who sat with her hands folded in her lap like she was waiting to be served tea. She finally looked at me.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a quiet, even voice.

