

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.

I leaned in to hold her, to tell her she had nothing to be sorry for, that we'd get through this together, but she held her hand up to stop me.

"There's more," she said.

I didn't want more. I wanted to put a hand over her mouth, to pull down the shades on this whole scene and curl into a ball until it all, her words, that whole moment in time, dissolved into vapor. I rested the arms May had refused in the space between us, burying my fists in the sofa cushions, and waited for her to finish.

"It's pretty advanced. It's already spread to both ovaries and into my abdomen. I didn't have any symptoms. My stomach was a little puffy but I thought I had just been eating too much bread. When I missed my period I thought I was pregnant but then the test was negative so that's why I went to see Dr. Ferris in the first place."

We sat in our silence for a while. Then I slid closer to her, and she finally let me hold her. She laid her head on my shoulder and said, "It's okay, though. I think it's going to be okay. We're going to start chemotherapy. Dr. Ferris says there's still a chance we can fight it. Insha Allah."

I said nothing.

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That night, after May had gone to bed, I went downstairs to the prayer room she had created. It was a little nook next to the living room, meant to be a sitting room or an office. May had painted the walls a pearlescent white and had plush, dark blue—sapphire, she called it—carpet installed. She'd hung a few tasteful calligraphy prints, Allah, the Prophet, and the Ayat al-Kursi in gold, and a black-and-white panorama of the Kaabah during Hajj, the swell of believers doing tawaf melting into each other like the rings of Saturn orbiting around its base. I didn't spend much time in there, and it was a shame, I then thought, because it was a peaceful room. I only prayed when May asked me to, in her gentle pleading. "Your recitation is so beautiful, though," she'd say. All those years of disuse, yet when I cleared the cobwebs out of my throat, the words still rolled out evenly. I pulled one of the rugs out from the basket where May kept them and laid it out. I knelt down and pressed my forehead into the rug. This was the position of sajdah, full humility and submission, the posture of the seeker. I waited, but the only word that came to me was "please." Please, please, please, please. I waited to feel something, to feel heard, but all I felt was alone.

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Flowers. That was all I saw when I first walked into the grocery store the next morning. Roses, red, pink, yellow, purple—I didn't know roses could be purple--tulips, orchids, daisies, and huge potted plants that seemed to reach out towards each other with their thick, waxy green leaves. I would have thought I was in a

forest if not for the shiny Mylar balloons announcing birthdays, weddings, and graduations that floated around amid the hanging ferns. My eyes bounced around to the signs hung above the aisles, trying to figure out where to start. Then I remembered May's list that I'd stuck in my shirt pocket. I pulled it out and scanned up to the first item: fruit.

Everything else on the list was quite specific, with brand names written in hurried script next to several items—a last minute adjustment with the knowledge that I would be going, I was sure. But next to fruit? Nothing.

When I think fruit, I think apples and oranges, maybe bananas if I'm feeling exotic, but not May. She's crazy about fruits and vegetables. She calls the produce section her "happy place." She comes home with all these weird and sometimes god-awful ugly things covered in fuzz and stringy hairs. One time she brought home something I thought was a red onion but it turned out to be a pomegranate. She offered me one and when I went to take a bite she started laughing.

"No, not like that," she said, then placed it on the cutting board and sliced into it with a sharp knife. She scooped out the little seeds that glistened like rubies and held them out to me in her palm.

"You eat the seeds?" I asked.

"The seeds are the fruit," she said.

It was as disappointing as getting a huge wrapped box on your birthday and digging through an ocean of tissue paper just to find a pair of socks. I didn't tell her that though, I just smiled and swallowed the slimy things without tasting them while she went on about antioxidants and superfoods.

I pushed my way through the dark maze of foliage into the oasis of the produce section, all lit up with stands piled high with vegetables and fruits. The overhead lights beamed on the thick purple skins of the eggplants that towered over the zucchini and squash tucked in next to them. Rotund tomatoes splayed out next to slender green beans, their stems curling into themselves. I could see why May liked this part of the store so much. It felt almost tropical with the pineapples and mangoes carefully perched on top of barrels and inside crates. Or maybe that was because an instrumental version of "The Girl from Ipanema" was playing on low volume over the speakers.

I tore off a bunch of bags and grabbed a few kiwis and dug through the mangoes until I found two that looked ripe. I skipped the papaya. They were green, and, besides, they smelled like feet. I spun the cart around to the other side. There were unripe plantains with tough, green skins, stumps of ginger that looked like arthritic hands, and something that looked like a skinny potato way past its expiration date. The sign said yucca root. I didn't know if it was a fruit or vegetable, but I bagged up three of them. May would find something to do with them in one of her cookbooks. She'd installed a bookcase in the kitchen that was overflowing with cookbooks she picked up at used bookstores and yard sales, or sometimes for free in the discarded book bin at the library.

May wasn't really a great cook—I think she thought every dish needed a

little Italian seasoning, everything always tasted faintly of rosemary and oregano, even when she fried fish—but what she lacked in skill she made up for with enthusiasm. She'd get the radio going and run around the kitchen banging pots and spoons, muttering over sauce-spattered recipes and shimmying her hips to Latin jazz as she stirred. Sometimes I'd linger in the doorway and watch her and imagine wrapping my arms around her and burying my face in that forest of dark, curly hair that she kept in a low, loose ponytail that trailed to the middle of her back. On our wedding night she'd taken off her hijab and let that wild mass of hair down and it was like watching a peacock fan out its magnificent tail.

I never did any of the things I imagined doing with May. I fantasized about ecstatic exchanges, me lifting her up on the counter by her glorious hips or laying her down on the kitchen floor, rolling around in the dust of stray cumin and coriander spice from her latest cooking experiment. But if I did manage to emerge from my darkened corner, I could only curl a lock of her hair behind her ear and press my lips to her cheek, warm and flushed from the heat of cooking steam. I wanted so much to get everything right this time with May that, truth be told, I was a little afraid of her.

May was my second chance. I'd been married before, briefly. My first wife, Rajah, was a friend of a distant cousin from my father's family, a North Sudanese student studying tropical medicine. After only three months of being married to me she declared me "boring" and said she wanted someone more fun. Our marriage was so brief we still qualified for an annulment, a fact that made my dissatisfied bride so happy she clapped when we stood in front of the clerk at City Hall. She erased me from her life like a smudge of kohl in the corner of her eye.

That couldn't happen again. I'd lost enough people. My dad when I was five, my mother right after I graduated high school. I had no siblings and Rajah didn't even give me a chance. I needed May. And not just to have someone in my life. It was her, with all her quirks and odd charms, the way she touched my hand when she talked, and pressed her nose to my cheek like she was sniffing my skin before she kissed me. It was her that I needed.

I looked down absently at the peach I held in my hand. I turned it around until I came across a dent in its skin. The tip of my thumb fit perfectly in the groove. I pressed down and a little juice pooled above my nail. I pressed down harder, my thumb sinking into the meaty pulp down to the firmer flesh below. I brought the gouged part to my mouth and took a bite. It was perfect, heavy with almost overripe sweetness with a bit of crunchy tang underneath.

I took another bite and tossed the peach into the top basket on the cart, not bothering with the plastic bag, and moved on to the plums. I grabbed one off the top that was hard and red and pressed my teeth into it. The bitter juice made my teeth stand up, but I swallowed down the tough meat anyway. I did the same with the apricots and pears, devouring half of a star fruit in one bite. I had a pile of mutilated fruit in my basket and was reaching towards a basket of kumquats to grab a fistful when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I turned to find a guy in a black polo with a nametag clipped to the edge

of the collar, his brows curled together in a deep V. Only then did I become aware of how I must look, a swarthy man with a beard that grazed my collarbone when I talked, no doubt looking like a creepy Taliban dude who'd gone jihad on the produce. My lips puckered from the fruit acids smeared around my mouth. I reached to wipe it with my hands, only to discover they were covered in slimy pulp.

The store worker gestured towards my cart.

"Bruh. You can't eat the fruit."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but I raised my hand to explain. I was going to tell him I had every intention to pay and show him the stickers I had peeled off the fruit and stuck to my hand, but instead I said, "It's okay, my wife is dying."

He took a step back and rested his arms at his side. For a second I thought he was going to salute me. He shook his head slowly. "Damn, dude."

"Yeah."

I tried to laugh, but the air caught in my throat. He knocked my arm with his fist and walked away. I didn't know why I said that, but I knew in that moment it was true.

May knew my mother was dead, of course, but I had never given her any specifics. I remembered sitting at the kitchen table doing homework while my mom cooked dinner, watching her prod her abdomen with her fingers, the lines on her forehead creased in a fearful concern. Then I remembered how her stomach began to swell like it was carrying the little brother or sister I had so badly wanted when I was younger. And then I remembered sitting in that empty kitchen feeling completely alone in the world.

I didn't tell May that. Just like I didn't tell her how much she meant to me, how much I loved her. How I studied her face in bed at night after she had fallen asleep and whispered to her eyelashes, "Maymuna, you are my moon." So much I didn't tell her.

I needed to get home to my wife. Groceries could wait. I pushed the cart aside, threw away all the half-eaten fruit, and made my way to the exit.

By the time I pulled up in front of the house, I had a new resolve. My faith in Allah might be shaky, but my faith in May was solid. Dying did not mean death. Dying meant you still had a chance at life. That's what May believed, and that's what I could believe, too. She would get better. She would beat the cancer, and then we would begin.

I burst through the door and ran upstairs to our bedroom. It was empty, the bed neatly made. There were smooth, even lines in the carpet. She'd vacuumed. I walked through the house calling her name. The living room was spotless and smelled faintly of jasmine. In the kitchen, every surface gleamed, not even a grain of salt on the white tile countertops. I looked around for a note, praying I wouldn't find a Dear Na'eem letter. I stood in the center of the kitchen like a lost child. I walked over to the French doors that led to the backyard and released the breath I'd been holding. May sat on her heels in the grass, wrapped in the sun's light. She was

wearing the same blue shawl from yesterday, this time wrapped loosely over her hair. Her gray abaya billowed out around her.

I stepped outside and shut the door. I opened my mouth to call her name but stopped when she bent forward, pressing her hands and forehead to the earth. She was praying, not in the fumbling way I had attempted the night before, but really praying, her body moving like water. She sat back on her heels, her mouth moving silently. She turned her head slowly to the right, then the left, greeting the angels, then she turned back to look at me.

I started talking as I walked over to her, blabbering really. I reached my hand out to her and pulled her up. I held her hands in mine.

“May, you were right, I shouldn’t have doubted you. We can fight this.”

“Na’em—”

She lifted her face to me. Her eyes were red. Streaks of salt stained her cheeks. Yesterday she’d looked confident, now she looked broken. I shook my head. I knew what she wanted to tell me.

“You’ll get the treatment and everything will be okay. And when you’re better, we’ll go somewhere, yeah? We’ll go to Sudan, huh, like you always wanted to. Find my relatives. See the pyramids. It’ll be great.” I didn’t know where Sudan came from, but it actually didn’t sound completely stupid, although the look May gave me said otherwise. “You were right, May. You’re always right. There’s a chance.”

“No, there isn’t,” she said. She shook her head. “I’m not doing the chemo.”

I kept going. “I didn’t know how to love you. I still don’t know. But I want to learn, I want you to teach me.”

She looked up at me with sad eyes. She put her hand over my heart, then dropped it. “This isn’t about you or us.”

She wouldn’t look at me anymore. Her jaw was set.

I didn’t trust myself to speak. To open my mouth would be like Musa splitting the sea, but in reverse. I had come to fight, for her, for us, only to be leveled at first blow. I took in a ragged breath and lifted my hand. It hung there, uncertain, then I took a lock of her hair and curled it behind her ear, letting my fingers graze her cheek, warm from the sun and damp from her tears. I closed my fist and let it drop.