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Left or Right?

by

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Ray had suspected that there was something going on with his wife, Tarah, but he thought it was just stress from her job. She'd been having some visible difficulty working nights lately at their mutual best friend Jared's law firm doing data entry. She had also been distant when she would be home, almost like she was thinking about something else. The thing about marrying your high school sweetheart is that you can really tell when something is off, even if they're pretending everything is okay. He had just figured that he would let her come to him about whatever was on her mind, unless it kept going for too long. There's only so many short answers that he was willing to take before he ended up losing his temper and confronting her, but it finally came to a head when he got home from work one day.

He entered the house and heard her talking softly in the kitchen. Talking to herself? Nah, must be a phone call. He shut the door a little louder than he normally would have so she would hear it, and then heard her immediately start talking quickly for a moment before going quiet. He started to walk toward the kitchen and couldn't stop himself from physically reacting to the smell of whatever punishment was being

concocted in the kitchen. He would usually do the cooking, but she had taken to making these truly awful dinners since she started the new hours. Due to the fact that she's typically getting ready for work and taking care of things she wanted done around the house when he would get home, she would just take care of food for him while she was doing that, and they were always terrible.

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That day's nightmare meal smelled like she had turned a pot of hot pondwater into a living creature and kept it alive by feeding it nothing but hot peppers and racial slurs.

Thank god I saw this coming and got food on the way home. He thought. She used to be such a good cook, I don't know what the hell happened.

He made it into the kitchen, against his body's protests, and gave her a kiss on the side of the head while she was washing her coffee cup.

“Who was on the phone? Anyone good?”

“What? Oh no, not at all, just Jared.” She said, reaching for the towel to dry her hands, “He's trying to get me to put in a good word with him with one of the other girls at work, but I actually like her and don't want to have to be her witness when it turns into a human resources catastrophe.”

“Yeah that's fair. He can come on a little strong and really freaks a lot of women out. That's why he's still single. He'll have to start wearing Hawaiian shirts soon, we're getting to be that age.”

“Oh stop, he's not going to be a creepy old man. Anyway, I really have to go, I made some Thai inspired salmon for you, it should be done in a few minutes!”

“Have a great night!” he shouted after her. “I lo--- ohhh shit guess not” the door

shut. He was already walking toward the stove to grab the pan and dump it down the garbage disposal.

Yep that's where that shit goes. It's like she knows I won't eat it and we're playing a game of who can bear to waste food for longer.

He decided to do the dishes while he was in there, and noticed a couple of glasses on the drying rack. He drank out of mason jars, and she would habitually use the same glass for an entire day. A simple thing like that made a lot of things click together in his mind, despite the fact that it was easily explainable, but this made more sense than stress. It made more sense than weird hours. It made more sense than anything.

Okay, game plan: I have to find out who it is, and I have to do something about this. I need an

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alibi when the times comes, that's for sure.

The line was ringing. Jared answers his phone after a few rings, and hearing how distraught Ray was, said he could break away from what he was doing and come over. Ray explained how Tarah had been cold and had seemed like she had mentally checked out, and then he found two glasses, and Jared stared at him hard for a long moment.

“So that's all you got?”

“I mean, well, yeah.”

“Dude I thought you were a lot more reasonable than this. She's tired because she works nights, and she used two glasses today. That doesn't mean she's fucking around on you. I'm gonna hit the head and take off.”

Jared straightened his tie and got up to go to the bathroom, leaving his phone on

the counter. It vibrated and the screen lit up from the receipt of a text message.

Tarah: *Does he know?*

Ray stumbled backward like he had just noticed a venomous snake on the countertop, and put as much distance between him and the phone as he could without seeming suspicious. He was lightheaded and went into a cold sweat. Jared came back in from the bathroom and saw that there was something wrong with Ray.

“Jesus man, you okay? You look like you're gonna yak.”

“Oh yeah, whatever Tarah made for dinner just hit my stomach and she cooks like she has no regard for human life lately. Say, I really have to do some work in the yard, but with this stomach ache, I'll shit my pants if I try to dig the hole I need for the koi pond. Can you help me out tonight?”

After some wheedling, Jared gave in and was getting started on digging, wearing Ray's gym outfit while they both drank beers. Ray couldn't find a subtle way to get Jared to admit to anything, so he sat there, watching Jared work. Once his beer was empty, he noticed that he was less nervous about

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navigating the conversation and decided he'd ask about the girl at work that Tarah had mentioned, and see if she actually existed.

“Say man, you ever notice how people in movies will just dig their own grave, thinking they can talk the guy with the gun out of killing them, and then they just die tired?”

Goddammit.

Jared stopped digging, looked at what he was doing, and looked at Ray. His grip

tightened on the shovel and he had a questioning smile on his face, like someone who just misheard a punchline and was trying to decipher what it was actually supposed to be. He grabbed his beer and took a slug. He went to say something, thought better of it, and took another sip.

“That's a hell of a question to ask while I'm over here digging and you're watching! You got a gun on you? Anything I should know?”

“Nah, nah, nothing like that.” Ray lied, “Just got to thinking about it because I'm supervising and all. Any last words?”

They shared a laugh. It was the tense kind of laugh that you let out when your boss tells you a joke about how fat his wife is and you're in the middle of trying to make a deadline, and you consider which pen to grab out of the cup on your desk to give him a tracheotomy. A while later, Ray finished his beer and tossed the bottle on the pile of empties. He decided to actually ask about the girl at work.

“I mean really though, why would you agree to dig your own grave in the first place?”

MotherFUCKER. I can't hold my liquor worth a shit anymore.

“Alright what the fuck, this hole is getting pretty deep and this shit ain't funny anymore. This could very well be a grave at this point, and you're the one outside the hole.”

Ray chuckled, “Yeah it doesn't need to be nearly that deep, I just figured I should have a hole available just in case. I'm trying to get to the bottom of this while you get to the bottom of that. Hey, totally unrelated, but you got a text earlier from Tarah while you were in the bathroom. You guys

planning a surprise party for me? My birthday isn't even for another few months.”

Jared looked at him, then down at the hole he had been digging, then back at Ray. He continued digging while he tried to form an answer. Tears started streaming down his face, leaving streaks in the dirt that had coated his entire person as he was digging. As the silence hung between them, Jared started to openly sob. Snot was streaming from his nose as he came to the realization that maybe those weren't just jokes. Maybe he was going to actually die tired right now. He sniffed hard and some of the snot retreated back into his nostrils.

Ray bent over the edge of the hole and grabbed Jared by the shirt. It was actually his own shirt. In fact, it was a gift from Tarah. He no longer cared about any of them. Jared, Tarah, or this dumb fucking three wolves howling at the moon shirt. He yanked Jared halfway out of the hole and elicited a noise that sounded similar to when a dog pulls too hard on their leash.

“Ray, please don't. I'll go. I'll go. I'll just fucking leave right now and you'll never see me again and you don't have to do this. Please, I'm fucking beg--”

“You've known me since we were teenagers, when have you ever seen me change my mind about something?”

“Please Ray, I swear, I'll just go. You won't even hear from me, I swear, just let me go.”

“No, Jared, that's not how this is going to work. For starters, I'm not actually going to kill you, you silly fucker. Murder would be so contrived in this situation and I don't have the stomach for that level of violence. You're going to stick around, and I'm

going to get a divorce. You're going to be stuck with Tarah and her attempted murder dinners, and I'll get this house. You can help her pay off her share.”

Jared nodded and slowly twisted against Ray's grip on the shirt in order to get onto his knees.

“Alright now comes the fun part though. You're going to need a reminder of what you did for love, and I'll be needing something in exchange for my whole world. You need to decide which of your

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pinkies you want to keep. Let's go inside and get me a souvenir. I think I'll put it in a belt buckle, what do you think?”