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Two Birds

Arthur swirled his double bourbon theatrically, tipped it to his lips and took a deep, satisfying swallow.

“That stuff is going to kill you,” Eileen said. She had said it so often over the course of their thirty-five-year marriage that the admonition had become almost perfunctory. Arthur was convinced that she didn’t realize she was saying it half the time, and the other half didn’t care anyway. How right she was, though, he thought to himself, with a soft chortle. When she was right, she was right, that Eileen. His perverse sense of humor was enjoying the irony of it enormously.

He’d finish his drink while he watched the local news, go to the kitchen table for dinner, manage to eat a bit and then, within the hour, grow nauseous and be forced to go to bed with stomach pain. This had been going on for four days now. Just a touch of the flu, he’d assured Eileen. It was really a touch of ethylene glycol that he had added to his own bottle of bourbon. It gave new meaning to the expression “name your poison,” didn’t it? Tonight he was upping the dosage a bit and he wasn’t quite sure what to expect.

Eileen returned to the kitchen at the ping of her timer, but only after pointedly moving the bourbon from the counter to the cabinet where it belonged. Her ridiculous tidiness was playing right into his hands. The bottle, which was essentially the murder weapon, was accumulating a nice little collection of her

fingerprints. Even better, he had sent Eileen to the hardware store to buy the antifreeze herself a week ago. Not only would her fingerprints be all over the large container out in the garage, her signature would be on the credit card receipt and she would be featured in the store video purchasing the stuff. He'd like to see her try to explain all *that* to investigators when the time came.

Arthur would have given two reasons for why he was doing this. First, he hated Eileen. He knew somewhere deep inside that his resentment was disproportionate to her offenses, but at the age of fifty-eight, Arthur didn't care. He had had enough.

Second, Arthur hated himself with equal measure. His level of self-loathing was such that the slow and torturous manner of death that he had chosen gave him an extra measure of satisfaction. He welcomed the physical agony. The end would be horrific, but so much the better, because who would believe for one minute that he had administered the stuff to himself?

There were less agonizing ways to kill oneself, after all, if that was the only objective. The easiest thing would have been pills or sitting in a closed garage with the car running. But Arthur didn't just want to escape his life; he wanted to leave a nice little legacy for Eileen. Two birds, as it were.

It needed to be a gradual process; a pattern must be shown. For some time, Arthur had been setting the stage, laying the groundwork, priming the pump—he could think of any number of delicious metaphors. About a month ago he had purchased quite a bit more life insurance on himself, for example, telling Eileen that he needed to know she was financially secure, should something happen to him.

Behind the scenes he had told the insurance agent that it had been Eileen's idea to increase the coverage. Gee, he'd joked with the guy, maybe he'd better watch his step from then on! He felt pretty sure that the agent would remember *that* little conversation.

He had been to see his internist yesterday, at Eileen's insistence. He had told the doctor with large and credulous eyes that his stomach upset always seemed to coincide with the dinner hour, but that it couldn't be Eileen's cooking, surely! The doctor had simply prescribed bed rest, bland diet and time. What a quack!

She called him to dinner and he drained his glass with gusto. He walked unsteadily into the kitchen where a glance at the table infuriated him. Eileen was dutifully, unimaginatively following doctor's orders. Arthur's plate held a small pile of white rice with boiled chicken and a few slices of plain toast. He sat and stared at his plate resentfully before announcing that he didn't feel up to eating.

"I'm sure you don't," Eileen responded sharply. She snapped her napkin like a whip and placed it in her lap, where she continued to smooth it, rather intensely. "I would imagine that you would be feeling a lot better if you hadn't just had a double scotch."

"You are undoubtedly right about that," Arthur returned heartily. She looked momentarily mollified. Let her think he'd thrown her a bone! He was privately relishing the image of calcium oxalate forming like hoarfrost on his insides, making a brittle, crystalline Swiss cheese of his kidneys.

“I think I need to go to bed,” Arthur said. As he stood, a sharp stab to his abdomen sat him heavily back in his chair. He was hyperventilating and could feel his heart racing. Eileen was at his side in an instant.

“We’re going to the emergency room,” she commanded.

“No. I will not go to the emergency room. I already saw O’Hakey and he said it’s just a bug.”

“But you’re not getting better. It looks to me like you’re getting worse.”

“I just need some peace and quiet and a good night’s sleep,” he responded as he rose again, this time successfully, and staggered for the stairs with Eileen in pursuit.

“If you’re not better by morning I’m calling Dr. O’Hakey myself!” she exclaimed from the foot of the stairs, as he labored up them and fell into his bed.

He suffered a fitful night, but by morning the pain had subsided. He was unusually fatigued, however, and his color was horrible. He smirked at his own reflection in the mirror. Let Eileen call O’Hakey; she couldn’t exactly drag him to the car, could she, and he wasn’t going anywhere! Another visit to the doctor would undoubtedly involve an order for blood work, and he couldn’t have that. He’d done his research; while no one would think to look for antifreeze directly, routine tests would show suspicious processes and that could lead to more targeted and condemning tests. He had to manage this. He couldn’t go to the hospital unless and until it was virtually too late. If he got overly ambitious, he ran the risk of losing control of the thing and ending up hospitalized when he could still be saved. And held accountable.

So when he came downstairs that morning, he put on his game face and, though she wasn't exactly persuaded, Eileen said nothing further about calling the doctor. She actually ran errands in the morning and then went on to her fitness-whatever-it-was in the afternoon, leaving him blissfully alone. He found that he couldn't sit up very comfortably and so he spent most of the day in bed, when he wasn't dragging himself repeatedly to the bathroom to pee. He tried to read, but his vision was blurry. By the time Eileen came home in the late afternoon, he was feeling a bit better. He sipped his scotch and sat in front of the television as per routine.

The evening news was becoming vague and immaterial to him. There seemed to be a lot of concern over issues that were either inconsequential or just plain indecipherable. The commercials were much the same. In fact, he was having trouble tracking what was a news story and what was actually a commercial message. It made for some fascinating television. He began to laugh, drawing Eileen out of the kitchen.

"What's so funny?" she asked. As usual, her tone suggested disapproval rather than any real interest.

"It would be very hard to explain," he returned, giving her a bright smile, but his speech was slurred, which only solidified her contempt. This was new, though, the slurred speech.

"Come sit down to dinner," she said.

Easier said than done, that was. As he stood, Arthur vomited in one explosive eruption. It surprised him as much as it horrified her.

“For God’s sake, Arthur!” she shrieked, her eyes trained on the multi-hued mess being wicked into her precious carpet. She raced for the linen closet where she kept her stain concoctions. He stood helplessly, afraid to move. He could see her coming back as if through the reverse end of a telescope, a pinhole view of her, with bright hot areoles in his peripheral vision. One broke free and exploded behind his eyes.

He came to sprawled on his stomach on the guest room bed, his neighbor, Charlie, lifting the soiled shirt from his shoulders. “What the hell?” Arthur barely managed to mutter.

“Just helping Eileen out,” Charlie responded heartily. “You had a little too much to drink, buddy. Passed out cold, covered in your own sick. Gotta get a handle on this, big guy.”

“Where’s Eileen?”

“She’s down working on the carpet. What the hell have you been eating anyway, dude?”

Arthur ignored him; he didn’t know this guy well enough to be subjected to such vapid familiarities, the arrogant little fuck! “Turn me over,” he ordered hoarsely, having attempted to turn himself and found that he couldn’t. He could feel Charlie removing his shoes, though he couldn’t raise his head enough to see him doing it. Or stop him. His head was pressed heavily, helplessly to one side and all he could do was stare at the chest of drawers with the big glass jug of pennies.

“No can do; I’m afraid you’ll puke again and then where would we be? Better stay on your belly for now.”

Arthur tried again to lift his head. Charlie walked into his limited line of vision and squatted down, face to face with him. "Listen, Arthur," he said, suddenly serious enough to call him by name. "Eileen tells me you've been hitting the scotch pretty hard. She thinks you might have been at it all afternoon while she was out today."

"I haven't been drinking any more than usual, Charlie."

"She says you've been pretty unsteady on your feet, kind of mush mouthed, passing out right after dinner...?"

"I've had a bug the last few days, for Christ's sake. Did she tell you *that*?"

"Listen, I'm not one to point fingers over a cocktail now and then. But think about it; if you're still drinking 'like usual,' even when you've got the stomach flu...well... You know what I'm sayin'?"

"I'll do some real soul searching, Charlie, if you just leave me alone right now, okay?" Arthur responded thickly. It felt as if his brain was seeping out his tear ducts.

"I'm just sayin'."

"Well say it somewhere goddamn else!" Arthur exploded. Charlie lifted his palms to the sky in an exaggerated expression of surrender, but at least he left, turning off the light as he closed the door. Arthur heard muffled voices downstairs. Charlie and Eileen discussing him no doubt, judging him, disrespecting him. It was ironic, but infuriating that they thought he was just a drunk who couldn't hold his liquor anymore. Shit heads, he was thinking, as he once again lost consciousness, this time for the night.

He woke to blinding sunlight; Eileen had thrown the roller blind up with a reproachful snap. Somehow he had managed to turn over onto his back during the night. One small victory. But he found that he couldn't raise a hand to shield his eyes against the light.

"Well," Eileen said tartly. "You had quite a night. I'll have to get a carpet company out to see to that stain, thank you very much."

What she was bustling around doing he couldn't imagine, but he wished she'd stop. Her judgmental industriousness was making his head throb.

"Do you plan to get up today?" she asked.

He couldn't imagine doing that.

"I thought you should know that I threw out every bit of alcohol I could get my hands on," she continued. "I'm not having any more of it in my house."

"You threw out my scotch?" he sputtered.

"Every drop."

"Where's the bottle?"

"Why do you care where it is? It's empty."

"Where is it!" He coughed violently.

"On its way to the landfill in this morning's trash pick up. The scotch is down the drain; why do you care where the bottle is?"

"None of your goddamned business."

"I'll thank you not to use that kind of language with me anymore, Arthur. You have no reason to be angry with me. I'm trying to help you. You are obviously no longer in control of your drinking, so I'm taking control."

“You think so? Well, you might be surprised!” he sneered.

“Yes, I think so. Look at you.”

It was true that he must look pretty pathetic at the moment. He could tell that he was too weak to get out of bed and he desperately needed to urinate.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Arthur snarled.

“Then go.”

“I’m too weak.”

“That says a lot, then, doesn’t it?” she said with a sniff, but she helped him get out of bed and supported him as he hobbled to the bathroom. She helped him lower himself to the toilet and waited to help him back to his bed, where she removed his belt and trousers. He lay there in his undershorts, his head spinning. It was infuriating. How was he going to have his cocktail that night? He’d have to go all the way out to the garage now for more antifreeze if he was going to continue this thing. And the way he was feeling at the moment, he didn’t see himself being able to do that.

He slept a lot that day. Eileen roused him at noon and asked if he could come to the table for lunch. He couldn’t, but he wouldn’t allow her to bring him anything to eat either. He refused all offers of help that he could, hating his dependence upon her. But by mid afternoon, he needed to go to the bathroom again and was no stronger. If anything, his legs were more flacid than they had been earlier in the day. He called out to Eileen and she came and once again assisted him, this time making a big drama about her back.

“You’re going to have to eat something, Arthur, if you’re going to get your strength back. I shouldn’t have to be helping you to the bathroom, for God’s sake.”

By dinnertime he was famished and grudgingly allowed her to bring him a tray. When she returned for it, he was desperate to go to the toilet again. Without a word, she left the room with his tray and returned with a bedpan.

“I’m not going to use a bedpan!”

“Then I guess you’ll wet yourself unless you can drag yourself in there, because I can’t keep getting you to the toilet. It’s too hard on my back.”

Arthur pondered this new situation. He couldn’t feel his legs anymore. He had a sick feeling that he wouldn’t be able to stand, even with her help. In the end he let her slide the thing under him, but he made her leave the room while he did his business. As she retrieved the bedpan, he couldn’t tell if the distaste on her face was about the contents or the mere fact of having to perform the duty at all. Probably some combination and how could he blame her? Still, he did. He asserted boldly that by the next day he’d be back on his feet. He fell asleep immediately after she left the room and never even woke up when she came later to turn off the television.

The next morning he was no stronger. It was then that he had a new thought. What if he had gone too far to get any stronger, but hadn’t gone far enough to properly end things. What if his current situation became permanent, no worse, but no better? That would be the ultimate indignity, long-term invalidism, living out grotesque days, helpless and under Eileen’s care. He knew that renal failure was a distinct possibility. Also congestive heart failure. She would never be able to care

for him under either of those circumstances. What if she stuck him in some kind of facility? It's what he would do in her situation.

Eileen was back in with the bedpan and a bite of breakfast. Where was his coffee?

"You're off coffee until you're able to get to the toilet by yourself." She pulled out a fresh pair of pajamas and laid them on the foot of the bed.

"What are those for?"

"I'm calling an ambulance for you as soon as you're done eating and I get you dressed. I can't manage regular pants, so it'll have to be pajamas."

"I'm not going to the hospital!"

"You have to, Arthur. You've had a stroke or something. Maybe you hit your head when you passed out; I don't know. But this has gone way beyond recovering from a bender or the flu."

"It never was a bender," Arthur hissed. "And it wasn't a stroke and it's not the flu and it's not a head injury!" His volume was elevating with his rage. "If you take me to the hospital you'll find out what it is, and you're not going to like it. *Everybody* will find out what it is, and *nobody* is going to like it!"

"What are you talking about?"

The story poured out then. In his anger and desperation he had no more control over what he was saying than he seemed to have of his musculature. Now that his beautiful plan was foiled, he wanted her to know how clever it had been and why he had done it. At the very least she'd realize that it was unwise to take him to the hospital. It would be her word against his, regarding who had administered the

poison and, really, he felt he could make a pretty strong case that he was the victim in this thing. Who would believe that he had set out on this protracted death march by choice? Any protests Eileen would make about his confession to her would sound very implausible. "I swear to God," he could hear her pleading. "He told me he'd been drinking antifreeze for two weeks!" Not bloody likely.

"Do you really want to play twenty questions with anyone about how I ingested ethylene glycol, Eileen?"

She stood there, nearly as paralyzed as he was. Her mouth hung slack; her eyes protruded in abject shock. It was nearly as gratifying, in a consolation-prize-kind-of-way, as pulling the whole thing off would have been. At least this way he was here to witness the effect of his revelation, something he would have missed otherwise.

Eileen quietly left the room. As the adrenaline subsided, he felt his bravado deflate like a balloon. He listened desperately for what she might be doing. Would she still go ahead and summon an ambulance? Call the police, maybe, and tell them what he had just told her? Surely not, but then she was probably in shock, so who knew what she might do. He was kind of in shock himself. What had he just done? What had he *been* doing? It had all been a stupid power struggle and, now that she knew, the ball was in her court. Dumb, dumb, dumb!

He had plenty of time to worry about it. Eileen didn't return for several hours and when she did she went about her ministrations wordlessly. For his part, he couldn't bring himself to ask what she was thinking or what she planned. She

came and went all day without a word passing between them. Finally, when she returned for the bedtime toilet, he was desperate to know where things stood.

“What are you thinking, Eileen?”

“I’m thinking that I won’t be able to keep this up. I’m exhausted.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Leave it to her to make everything about herself.

She didn’t respond at all then. She performed her bedpan duties, found the television remote where it had fallen on the floor, picked up his dinner tray and left the room.

The days passed and it was clear that his muscles were deteriorating. He had minimal movement now. Every couple of hours Eileen came in and pushed the bedpan under him as if she were an underpaid nursing home aide. He could still raise his hips enough for that, at least. He could scratch his nose, roll on his side and back again, reach for the water bottle on his nightstand. But he got terribly winded doing such simple things.

One night he woke desperate to urinate. He didn’t want to call Eileen. She would be a big martyr about being awakened in the middle of the night. Surely he could roll himself out of bed and crawl, if nothing else, to the toilet. He rolled over a full turn and tried to pivot his legs to the side of the bed. No luck. He took a chance, hoping to roll one half turn more, just enough to teeter on the edge. Then maybe he could steady himself with a hand on the bedside table and drop off to his knees. But momentum caused him to overshoot and he dropped to the floor with a reverberating thud. That summoned Eileen, of course. She stood looking rather dispassionately at his helpless sprawl.

“I don’t know if I can get you back in bed, Arthur,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Why don’t you ask your good friend Charlie to come help you out again?”

“I don’t want the neighbors to know you’re bedridden,” she replied.

“Gee, am I an embarrassment to you, Eileen?”

“Charlie asked about you this morning when I went out to get the paper,” she said. “I told him you didn’t want to see him because you were too embarrassed about your behavior the other night. He said he’d leave you alone, then, even though he’s concerned.”

“Well thank God for small favors.”

Her expression was completely enigmatic. “How would you propose I get you into bed so we can use the pan?” she asked.

He instructed her every step of the way. She should get him under the arms and prop him up against the side of the bed. Take a minute to catch her breath and then lift him from under his buttocks until he fell backward with his torso horizontally across the bed. Grab him under the knees and use her body weight to push until he was securely positioned. Then take his ankles and pivot him until he was horizontal. He helped to the degree that he could with what was left of his coordination and strength.

“You have blood in your urine,” she said bluntly, and utterly without concern, after he had relieved himself. She stepped into the bathroom, flushed the urine and then marched briskly to the door, where she turned and ordered, “Do not try to get out of bed on your own again. You could break something, and then where would you be?”

“No worse off,” he snarled.

“You think not? I think you would be, as I have no intention of ever taking you to the hospital.”

“If I broke something, you’d have to.”

“Really?”

He felt alarm electrify the hairs on his forearms.

“What are you saying?”

“I haven’t decided exactly what I’m going to do with you yet, but I can tell you that you’re not getting the benefit of medical attention, no matter what happens. For the moment I’m okay with feeding you and sliding a bedpan under you a couple of times a day. But I’m not going to lift a finger to make you better. You made your bed.” She had a thought and she chuckled derisively. “And you sure are lying in it, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean, for the *moment*, you’re okay with it?”

Again, no answer for him. She just counseled him to get some sleep and walked out, quietly closing the door behind her. The question plagued him all that sleepless night and when she returned in the morning to help him with the bedpan, she ignored repeated requests to answer it. She went quietly about her business, doing what was necessary, but no more, and doing it disinterestedly. The question of what she planned consumed every conscious moment, though those were fewer and fewer. He drifted in and out of sleep, the television keeping up a mindless drone that had completely ceased to register with him. That night he stopped urinating.

He was still unable to urinate the next morning. It was just as well. Had he needed to empty his bladder, he knew he would have been unable to raise his hips enough to accommodate the bedpan.

“Well,” Eileen said that morning. “That’s not good.”

He tried to speak, but he couldn’t get his tongue to move. He could no longer feel his extremities, but something was terribly wrong with his back. He could feel that well enough. Undoubtedly it was his kidneys shutting down.

“I think it’s time we moved on,” Eileen stated definitively, though her tone made it clear that didn’t mean helping him. She took his left arm and pulled it hard to rotate him a quarter turn, with his shoulders off the bed, and then she slipped her hands into his armpits and flopped him to the floor. The impact of his butt hitting the hard floor sent his back into agonizing muscle spasms. Worse, she was dragging him across the floor now, toward the bedroom door, walking backwards, stooped, and stopping every few steps to catch her breath and stretch out her back. As she struggled him through the door and down the hall, she offered a candid narrative. “It appears that you are in a bad, bad way. That being the case, you can’t just die in your bed. How would I explain not seeking medical attention for you all this time? Worst-case scenario, I’d be held criminally liable. And even if I wasn’t, I’d probably have a hard time collecting on your life insurance, neglect being involved and whatnot.”

By now they were halfway across the kitchen and she paused to get a drink of water at the kitchen tap, as she gazed out the window above the sink. “Oh, look,” she said, mopping her brow with the dishtowel. “My little finches are back.” He had

never seen her quite so composed. She returned to where he lay staring up at the ceiling tiles. He heard her open the door to the garage, flick on the light and then slide open the side door of the minivan. “Okey, dokey,” she said, and she lifted his shoulders again and continued her labors as she continued her monologue. “Seems to me there’s only one course of action. I will go out for the afternoon—I have a hair appointment, by the way—and I will come home in a few hours to find that you have lain down in the back of the van, with the engine running and the garage doors closed. I’ll be sad, of course, but not particularly surprised. As I’ve been telling Charlie, and pretty much everybody else I’ve chatted with, you haven’t been yourself lately. You’ve been drinking so much and you’ve been awfully depressed.” She was bumping him down the two concrete steps into the garage. The blow to his kidneys was excruciating. “It’s a good thing there’s been a clear downturn the last few days. You’ll finally realize your death wish, and I won’t be caring for an invalid for the rest of my life. Two birds!” She leaned him against the side of the van, pushing hard on his chest as she straddled his waist, put her forearms under his armpits and lifted him enough to slide him, up to his hips, onto the rim of the open door. Then she walked briskly to the opposite side of the vehicle, all the time keeping up her matter-of-fact patter. “You’d been at *such* loose ends since retirement. You’d lost all your enthusiasm for life. You have quite simply been so full of self-contempt and hopelessness that, looking back, suicide seemed inevitable. Hindsight, as they say.”

She had pulled him all the way into the vehicle now. She climbed in beside him and swiveled his legs around so that he was positioned vertically with his feet near the vehicle’s back door as she slammed it shut.

“Let me grab my purse,” she said, dusting her hands, and then all was silent in the garage. Arthur lay and stared helplessly at the dome light. All too soon she was back. “I almost couldn’t find your keys,” she said brightly as she reached in and turned the key in the ignition and then closed the driver’s side door, as the engine engaged. “Be back in a couple of hours,” she said, as she released the sliding door, completely sealing the van. Arthur heard the brisk pat, pat of her shoes and then he heard her getting into the other car. He watched a curtain of light rise, illuminating the dark van, as the garage door opened at the command of her remote. Then he watched a curtain of darkness descend, as she backed out of the driveway, lowering the door behind her.