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KIM MAGOWAN

SHOELACES

BECCA ALWAYS MISPLACED things, most annoyingly (Robert's word; Becca's word would be "ironically") her reading glasses. Or perhaps Robert would choose "amusingly," since it was objectively amusing to watch Becca careen about their house, crying, "Glasses, where are my reading glasses?" As if calling them by name would make them materialize. As if they were a sentient creature.

He'd watch her zoom about, patting various surfaces, and try to decide whether she more resembled the Tasmanian Devil (the frantic whirling) or Mr. Magoo (the blind ineptitude), then consider the absurdity of determining which Looney Tunes cartoon character his wife most embodied. Finally, Becca would say, "Robert, help me find my reading glasses."

Please, if she only said please, he had often thought—that word would make him so much more civil. "Why do you need my help?" he'd say instead, and Becca would respond, "Because Robert, I can't fucking see."

Today, it was her new shoelaces for her favorite red boots. The arena in which the shoelaces could have vanished was small, because they were not in their house in Berkeley, but rather on vacation in Paris, having first dropped

off their daughter Lily at college in Scotland. They were in a café on Rue du Bac. Robert looked at the surface of the table: the only object upon it was a pair of kitchen shears, which Becca had borrowed from the waiter to clip off the tag from her most recent purchase, a gray sweater which she bought earlier that day. This sweater had such a loose web, it looked like it was made by magical spiders. It was an extravagantly expensive sweater, definitely a special occasion sweater. They'd first seen it yesterday, in a shop on Rue Saint-Honoré. Robert had planned to return there today and buy it for a twentieth anniversary present. Robert had it all worked out: in the morning he'd say he was off to get pastries, he'd zoom back to the shop, he'd claim he got lost when he returned to their hotel an hour later after first stashing the sweater with the concierge, Becca would roll her eyes at his crappy sense of direction, and then, two months later, *voilà!*, he'd produce the sweater.

But Becca had woken up this morning, looked at him brightly, and said, "I just can't stop thinking about that sweater." Off they had trudged, across the Seine and then Tuileries, so she could buy it.

Really, it was frustration at being deprived of doing a kind, loving deed that had put Robert in such a grumpy mood.

"I can't believe we're in Paris, and all we're doing is shopping," he'd grumbled while the sweater was getting rung up. Becca had looked at him in surprise and said, "Shopping is classically what people do in Paris! Haven't you ever read any Edith Wharton?"

This was the nature of his marriage, Robert sometimes thought, to

dispute who had the best grip on reality.

Now, the shoelaces.

Becca had bought them at this same overpriced, elegant store. It was the kind of store that looked like a tiny museum, where the value of its merchandise was conveyed by how little of it was on exhibition. This cobweb sweater, for instance, occupied its own shelf. The red shoelaces were displayed on a small table, along with a gold pair and a blue pair. They were all perfectly arranged, a nest of immature snakes. Becca had picked them up delightedly: “These will be perfect with my red boots!”

Seventeen euros was what the shoelaces cost. Becca had not even blinked when the salesgirl rang up her credit card. Nor had she once asked Robert whether he thought four hundred euros was too extravagant for a sweater, which made him doubt his fantasy, the prior night, of how thrilled Becca would be at his intended anniversary present. He’d gone to sleep imagining her expression, the way she would look first at the sweater, lifting it gently and almost dazedly out of its box, and then at him: grateful joy for being understood so perfectly by her beloved. He’d even pictured (this had been his last image before falling asleep) Becca straddling him, wearing only the sweater, her nipples visible through the web.

But then, this morning, her blithe announcement, “I can’t stop thinking about the sweater!” On the trudge back to the store, Robert lagged a cranky two paces behind, Becca too focused on their destination to notice. Not his image of leisurely walking through Paris, deliberately getting lost, holding hands, their joined arms swinging.

“Where’d I put the shoelaces?” Becca said again.

“Maybe they fell out of the bag?”

“No, they were there when I took out the sweater,” said Becca, and so it began—the Mr. Magoo patting of the table top, the Tasmanian Devil whirling about, though confined for the time being to a frenzied neck rotation.

It was another thing that Robert found both annoying and amusing about his wife: she didn’t seem to mind looking silly, even ridiculous, in public. Here she was in Paris, wearing a brand new, absurdly expensive sweater which she had put on as soon as she had clipped its tag, but her feet were in nothing but socks. She had taken off her boots (in a café! In full view of snobby Parisians!), pulled out their old, frayed, but perfectly adequate laces, and asked the waiter to dispose of them—actually handed him the old shoelaces, which the waiter took with a grimace, as though they were a wad of chewed gum. The only thing remotely satisfying about this exchange was that the waiter’s prior impression of Becca had seemed far too positive. Sure, her French was excellent: she knew the word for scissors. Sure, his wife, even at forty-six, was extremely pretty. But sometimes Robert found being married to a woman strangers admired exhausting, and perhaps this is why he didn’t unilaterally mind (though he did to some degree mind) the actions Becca performed that also made her ridiculous, for instance this removal of boots in public.

Now Robert looked underneath the table. Curled at the base of its iron stem, he saw the shoelaces. Again they reminded him of a baby snake—

something poisonous. Weren't bright colors intended to communicate danger?

He bent down, grabbed the shoelaces.

"Here they are."

If Becca had smiled. If she had conveyed, in any trivial way, her gratitude that Robert had found the overpriced shoelaces, in the same dependable way he found (over and over again) her reading glasses. But Becca instead stretched out an imperious hand, as if Robert were the waiter, as if this were some play-in-reverse of that scene five minutes ago where she had handed the waiter the old shoelaces. Except imperfectly reversed, because when she handed over the old shoelaces, Becca had accompanied that cavalier gesture (which made the waiter grimace) with her signature dazzling smile (which made the waiter soften and smile back after all—Becca's smile was a force difficult to resist).

"Give them to me," she said.

"I wish you'd say 'Please,'" Robert said.

Becca stared back. Again, a smile would have made all the difference. A smile would have lightened the whole situation, shown that Becca could laugh at her Tasmanian Devil-slash-Mr. Magoo self. It would have clarified that Robert was merely teasing.

No smile, however.

To cue that smile (if she could sprinkle it so lavishly on waiters, why not her husband of nearly twenty years, taking her on a romantic trip after they dropped off their only child at college?), Robert said, "I'd even accept

a *'sil vous plait.*'”

Now that was objectively a funny thing to say! Funny and even charming! But still, no smile. Instead, a flush began to extend from the collar of Becca's brand-new sweater up her neck in a way that Robert knew well. His wife resembled a thermometer; her rage literally climbed.

“Give me,” said Becca, “the fucking shoelaces.”

If the kitchen shears were not right in front of him. But there they were. Robert placed his hand upon them.

“Say ‘please.’”

“Stop being an idiot,” said Becca.

If she had used another insult, like “jerk,” one that was more contextually accurate. But “idiot”—they had a fraught history with that word. Robert had given injunctions: “Never call me an idiot again.” It had to do with the way Becca wielded her intellectual superiority (knowledge of Edith Wharton, say, or proficiency in French).

Twenty years ago she had gone so far as to rewrite Robert's wedding vows (they had written their own vows, and she'd found his lying on his desk) to make them what she called “prettier.” Becca had been confused by Robert's anger. “I kept all your content!” she said. “I just made them more eloquent!” One could argue (and indeed Robert had argued, and had pulled out both a dictionary and a thesaurus to support his claim) that Becca's revision of Robert promising to love her all their lives to “adore” her all their lives was, in fact, a material content change. (“Love,” Robert had insisted, pointing to the dictionary, implied equality; “adore” implied submission,

was akin to “worship”). This argument, mere hours before their wedding, when Robert had first seen Becca’s penciled notes on his heartfelt vows, had them both in tears and had almost derailed the wedding altogether.

Now Robert picked up the scissors and cut the shoelaces in half. He had not really intended to do so—simply to threaten the action—but the French shears were surprisingly strong and sharp, and snapped through the shoelaces in one bite.

Becca’s mouth dropped open, once again making her resemble some cartoon character. Because wasn’t that what cartoons did, to convey shock or dismay? It was an objectively funny visual, which is why Robert, rather than apologizing at this juncture, laughed. Which made Becca’s mouth close, and then close even more, become such a small, thin, set line that it seemed as if her mouth were zipping itself shut forevermore.

They looked at each other. Becca’s blue eyes filled with tears.

If she had said, “I can’t believe you did that,” or something that communicated a grief that accompanied the tears, Robert would have apologized. He was already feeling a wave of contrition, flooding up him like Becca’s rage-flush up her neck.

Instead, Becca said, “That’s it.”

Robert raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Becca repeated, “That’s fucking it. This is over.”

“We’re splitting up?” Robert said. She looked back at him, unflinchingly, not nodding, exactly—it was as if no extraneous motion could now be spared—but not denying it.

“Over shoelaces?” Robert added.

His question sat between them, unspooling its ramifications. In some ways this had been the battle of the last five years—who was shaping their narrative. Robert felt, for the first second since the decisive and foolhardy action of severing the shoelaces, a return to a position of power. Becca would indeed look foolish, if he told their relatives, their friends, “She left me because I cut up her shoelaces.”

“Because you’re immature and petty and violent,” Becca said. When he once again inquiringly raised his eyebrows (Robert knew Becca hated that gesture, knew moreover that her hatred of it was perfectly justified), she said, “Yes, violent! You think I’m exaggerating?” She leaned forward. She’d been leaning away from him, as if he were too disgusting to be near, but now she positioned herself so as to fire at close range. “Well, what do you think cutting shoelaces in front of me with a pair of fucking kitchen shears is meant to express? What would Dr. Tyler say about that?”

Dr. Tyler had been their couples’ therapist; Dr. Tyler saw no relevant difference between punching Becca in the face and punching the wall three feet away from her, which made Robert furious and Becca smug and vindicated. Of course the difference was relevant! In twenty years of marriage, Robert had never laid a hand on Becca, despite having cause. Punching the wall had only injured himself (bruised his hand), yet Becca and Dr. Tyler had both called it abusive. If punching a wall was the same as punching Becca, Robert had maintained, then her so-called “emotional” affair was the same as a physical affair.

“You’re really proposing that I was threatening you?” Robert said. “With these?” He held up the kitchen shears, and Becca dramatically recoiled as if he had held up an assault rifle.

“They are a weapon!” Becca said. “Didn’t you see—oh, man, don’t you remember, that Hitchcock movie, Grace Kelly was in it, she was wearing all those gorgeous clothes—”

“*Rear Window?*”

“No, no, the one where her husband hires that guy to kill her and she stabs him with a pair of shears. *Dial M for Murder.*”

Robert will remember this as a potential turning point in his marriage, a time when disaster reared its head, bared its fangs, and then slithered away. They had come that close. He had 95% believed, two minutes before, that Becca and he were finally done, that he would storm away from his wife in her stocking feet and red boots with no laces and go back to their hotel, to which Becca would return later only to pack. He could picture the whole thing: calling Lily, telling their daughter “We’ve been having trouble for years,” that they had only stayed together because of her. He would finally (justifiably?) be freed to tell their daughter about her mother’s damaging “emotional” affair five years ago, and how he had tried to forgive her, but now Lily was off to college, and there was no more reason (or did he mean excuse?) to keep up the charade.

No more reason, that is, other than the fact he still loved annoying, forgetful, unappreciative Becca with all of his grudge-holding heart. When it came time to say his vows twenty years ago, at the decisive moment,

Robert had used “adore” after all. Becca had smiled dazzlingly and squeezed his hand.

“Oh yes,” Robert said. “Now I remember the shears. But Grace Kelly’s clothes were better in *Rear Window*.”

“True. Though that’s a high bar.” Becca’s lips puffed out to their normal size and shape, her mouth remaking itself.

“I’m sorry about the shoelaces. I’ll replace them,” he said, and Becca looked ruefully at her boots.

“How am I supposed to walk? I gave my shoelaces to the waiter.”

“The hot waiter who couldn’t stop looking at you,” said Robert, and Becca laughed. Robert began unlacing his own shoes. “Here, take my laces for now, they’ll hold up for the time being. You go to the Musée D’Orsay, it’s right down the block, I’ll run back to the insanely expensive shoelace store, and I’ll meet you at that rhinoceros statue in front of the D’Orsay in an hour and a half.”

“You can walk without shoelaces? And you can find the store?”

“Trust me,” said Robert, now done lacing Becca’s boots—his shoelaces only went up the first four holes but would do for now. Becca wedged her feet in them and stood up. They exchanged another look—wary, relieved. Becca didn’t kiss him, but she patted his head and said, “Okay, rhino at three.”

Robert wiggled his strange, untethered feet. He watched his wife walk gingerly, temporarily, away from him.