

Leader of Men

by Meg Tuite

My dad was a tall, good-looking man, though his features bore the slight tremor of the frenzied, similar to that strained purposefulness of a dog that has come to the end of its chain, but does not agree. He was waving a butcher knife out in front of himself while he spoke, and with each thrust, the knife, a bit of a yes-man itself, nodded up and down in obvious collusion with dad who held it, giving an added force to his words that alone they didn't carry. My mom watched my dad and the knife equally, but said nothing, though her face, exquisite in its own right, said everything.

They stood in front of a wounded tomato that mom had been brutally mutilating before dad had been able to assess the seriousness of the situation and rush in to salvage it from its complete demise. There the tomato sat in front of them, bleeding to death from its right side, a savage testimony to the woman's complete and utter incompetence.

"Wrong," my dad said. "Wrong, wrong, wrong!" He snatched up the knife, calling a halt to this obscene bloodbath. Was it necessary for him to be everywhere at once? Was there nothing that his wife wouldn't destroy if left to her own devices? She understood nothing—absolutely useless. Dad held the knife forcefully and with authority, letting it know immediately that he was in charge now and it was to do exactly as he said. "Look," he said. "Look at the knife. See how I hold it?" It was true. In his hand the knife was pointed and dangerous. It was a weapon, an extension of himself.

My mom's reddened, shriveled hand had reduced the knife to nothing more than a feeble, clumsy thing that fumbled ridiculously with vegetables, pawing them into a slow and painful death. The blade stuttered and hung its head foolishly until it became as dull and lifeless as her tongue.

Dad looked over at mom once more. His eyes rolled together in disgusted formation from one side of his head to the other, a trembling final summation of his entire contempt and without another moment's hesitation, he gripped the knife like nothing less than a leader of men. Using swift, competent strokes he sliced the remaining portion of the tomato that mom had not been able to deface, whereupon the tomato-eighths, also prepared to show her a lesson she would not soon forget, dropped neatly away from each other and lined themselves up efficiently, cleanly and precisely—like well-trained little soldiers in uniform red.

Dad gave mom one more derisive look and swaggered out of the kitchen. Mom stared at the tomato, and then after dad. "This is your head," she said.

Mom slammed the remains of the tomato against the wall and watched them slide artfully, gracefully down to the floor.

