

Kirby

Jeremy stirred the soup on the stove, then ladled out a couple bowls. Peter was the only other one home for the moment. He hovered over the little chicken cage in the corner of the kitchen, watching the chicks in the warm yellow light, forking leftover corn kernels through the grating and onto the bright sawdust floor.

“How much soup do you want, Peter?”

“I don’t know. Just a bowl, you know.”

“Well I’m *putting* it in a *bowl*, how much do you want in it?”

“Just a bowl of soup. Whatever you consider a bowl of soup, that’s what I want.”

“How much broth do you want, compared to vegetables? What kind of ratio?”

He looked up at Jeremy, “Well... ” he stammered, “*Some*. I don’t know, just, whatever.”

Jeremy brought the bowls to the table. “We gonna watch a movie tonight?”

Peter set the empty corn plate in the sink and sat down at the table, “Um, yeah, I’d like to. Just don’t invite anyone over, I’m tired of people, I just want to relax tonight.”

A small cat jumped onto Peter’s lap. “Hey Blackie,” he cooed, petting the creature’s soft head and back.

“We gotta get rid of that cat.”

“Nooo. Really? He’s not so bad.” Peter found Blackie on Craigslist for free, as he did the chicks. He felt inherently sorry for little animals, and consequently, his house became full of them. The only thing that limited his acquisition of new creatures was a near complete absence of free time, which oftentimes left the burden of Peter’s charity on his housemates.

“Peter. He poops all over the house—” Jeremy counted the cat’s crimes on his fingers. (One)

“She. She’s a she. And she’s just a kitten.”

“Ok. She scratches the furniture, which isn’t ours.” (Two)

“Oh,” Peter said weakly.

“She’s always trying to murder the chickens and they start screaming their heads off.” (Three)

The doorbell rang. Peter escaped to answer it.

“Good evening, sir, how is your night going?”

“Uh, fine. Good,” Peter said. His heart sank. The man was dressed in a white and blue pinstripe jumpsuit and had a clipboard in his hand. The local university just started recruiting lots of students from Africa, mostly Nigeria, and, given the man’s slight accent and the relative absence of black people in rural Oregon towns, he must be a student. He seemed to be dedicated to keeping his eyes locked onto his clipboard. Another of his key values must be to begin speaking no later than during the last syllable of his customers’ sentences.

“—That’s excellent to hear, sir. Are you the current owner of or are you familiar with Kirby vacuum cleaners?”

“No. Well, yes, I’ve heard of them.”

“That’s great, then you must know that Kirby is still America’s #1 vacuum even after 80 years of

service and over 5 million vacuums sold in the contiguous United States including the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.” Despite his memorization, the man spoke somewhat timidly and looked uncomfortable in his costume, which itself resembled a huge vacuum bag.

“Um... ”

“Who’s that, Peter?” Jeremy yelled from the table.

“It’s, uh, a vacuum... thing... guy.”

“What?” Jeremy came over to the door and stood defensively behind Peter. “What do ya want?” he demanded, chewing.

“Good evening, sir, I was just telling your friend here—”

“He’s not my friend,” Jeremy interjected, putting his arm around Peter’s waist, “He’s my lover.”

“Oh stop it, Jeremy,” Peter brushed him off, “I’m sorry, sir, he’s... a jerk, and insane.”

“Oh, well, I’m here representing Kirby—”

“Who’s Kirby?” Jeremy asked.

“Well, Kirby is a now international conglomeration of vacuum cleaning—”

“An international what?”

“Jeremy—” Peter pushed him away. He came back.

“A conglomeration,” the salesman said carefully, “Which is a group of associated—”

“Yeah, I know what it is, I just wanted to know if you did.”

“That’s fair—” the salesman, who looked tired.

“Listen Kirby, we’re not going to buy your shitty vacuum. Nothing you say can make us buy anything.” With that, Jeremy went back to the table and continued slurping his soup.

“I’m sorry about him,” Peter said.

“It’s okay, I understand that money might be tight, that’s why I’m here to do a free demonstration.”

“No, I don’t think—”

“Free demo?” Jeremy yelled from the table. “You mean you’ll suck all the shit out of our cushions and pillows for free?”

“Yes,” he said cautiously, “Because once you see how much dirt you’re sitting on and breathing, we’re sure you’ll decide—”

“Well we’re sure alright, Kirby, we’re not going to give you a penny, but feel free to do your little thing.”

Peter looked at Jeremy incredulously, “No, don’t listen to him, we’re not interested, sir, I’m sorry, but—”

“Listen, sir,” the salesman interrupted, “I only get paid for this week if I do five demos. I’ve already done four, so if you just let me do a quick demo I’ll get paid and there’s no pressure on you. Please.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Peter saw his only free evening of the week slipping away.

“No, come on in, Kirby, we’re not doing anything.” Jeremy yelled, through a mouthful of soup.

The salesman looked at Peter for permission. His expression resembled that of all the little animals

Peter couldn't avoid taking in.

"Come on, Peter, what the hell's wrong with you. You want this guy to go home without a paycheck because of you?"

"No, no. Alright, come in," Peter stepped sadly aside.

It was getting dark. The salesman stepped in with his clipboard and surveyed the living room. He squeezed the couch cushions and ruffled the pillows. "Alright, let me call my supervisor to bring the equipment by."

"What? You don't have your stuff here?" Peter asked, "How did you get here?"

"My supervisor dropped me off then went to drop the other salesmen off." He flipped open his phone and waited. "Hi Greg, this is David, I'm at a house here and they want the demo, so bring the truck on by." Was he leaving a message? How long is this travesty going to take? Peter wondered.

He flipped his phone closed. "My supervisor should be here any minute," he smiled badly at Peter. Peter stood there frowning at him for a moment then sat down at the table. "You mind if I finish my dinner here?" Peter said.

"Oh, no, not at all, sir."

"Have a seat, if you want," Peter told the salesman, then glared at Jeremy, who was grinning widely and eventually laughed.

"What is it, Peter?"

Peter shook his head and kept eating.

"Thanks, but I better wait out front for him."

"What, are our couches are too dirty for you, Kirby?" Jeremy asked, looking straight at the salesman.

"No, it's just—"

"I'm joking, Kirby, lighten up."

The salesman laughed a little, then meandered outside. He stopped in front of the window and pulled out a cigarette, rested it between his lips. He fished through the pockets of his jumpsuit for a light as he almost imperceptibly spun the cigarette in place between his lips. While he gazed down the street, the small logo on the cigarette appeared and disappeared as if it were rotating on its own. He found the lighter in a back pocket, but left it there, then even took the cigarette out of his mouth and quickly stashed it back in his pocket.

"What's the matter with you? Why did you invite him in?" Peter asked as soon as the door closed, "This is exactly what I was trying to avoid. I don't want to babysit a salesman."

"Well, we gotta help the guy out. It'll just take a few minutes."

"No, no. Don't you know what this is? These things take hours. It's already dark out."

"Oh stop whining, Peter, we already said yes." Jeremy got up to wash his bowl out.

A white van pulled into the driveway and a large man walked around and opened the side doors of the van. He produced a large vacuum and a bag of associated parts. He and the salesman rolled the vacuum together to the door then the man got back in the van and drove away. David dragged the thing

into the house and began assembling it. Peter finished his soup and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. “Blackie,” he called in falsetto. David looked confusedly up at Peter. “Here kitty kitty kitty,” Peter added.

David locked the last piece into position and was ready. “I can clean cushions, mattresses, pillows, carpet, cobwebs, like in the corners of the ceiling, clean out sink drain pipes and garbage disposals. Which one of those should I do?”

“You can do the kitchen sink? It hardly drains anymore, that’d be great,” Jeremy said.

“Yes, I can, but maybe I could do a cushion first. I just put the cushion attachment on.”

“Okay well do a cushion then the sink.”

David asked which cushion he should do first. “Do that little one-person chair in the corner first,” Jeremy said, “that’s the one I fart on all day long.”

David set to work.

“Sun up to sun down, one fart after another,” Jeremy added. When Peter glared at him, Jeremy laughed. “What? It’s true.”

David called Peter over and showed him a white circular filter as if it were a deck of cards in a magic trick. Then he stuck the hose of the #1 selling vacuum cleaner in the contiguous United States on top of Jeremy’s fart pad and the filter, resting in the middle of the clear vacuum tube, began to tint. As soon as the vacuum turned on, the chicks became very agitated and peeped desperately.

“You see?” David encouraged, pointing to the filter.

“Oh wow!” Jeremy screamed over the roaring vacuum from the dining room table without looking up from the newspaper, “What a filter! Some kind of conglomeration you’re participating in there, Kirby.”

“That’s great,” Peter said, standing over David, arms folded.

David turned the machine off. The chicks were peeping blood-curdling peeps. Jeremy jumped over to them, “Blackie’s murdering the chickens again.” David looked up.

Peter rushed over. “No, they’re just scared of the noise.” He peeled the top grating off and snatched one of the chicks up and held it to his chest, petting its head. He stepped out onto the back porch to help the little thing calm down. Jeremy went back to the paper.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know you had chickens.”

“It’s fine. Do another one,” Jeremy said, again without looking up. David was looking over at the coop where the chicks were still chattering, though calming. “Go ahead, man, do that one,” Jeremy said, supposedly absorbed by the newspaper, blindly pointing to the couch.

Voom!

The chickens roared again. Peter rushed back inside when he heard the vacuum, “What are you doing? Stop!” The vacuum subsided. He put the chick back in the coop and tried to calm them by putting his hands softly over their heads and shushing.

“It’s fine, Peter. Relax. They’re just chicks. Besides, they’ll have to get used to terrorism as long as that evil cat’s around.”

“Where is Blackie? Black-ie, Black-ie,” Peter scoured the house.

“It’s amazing how much dust and dead skin is packed into the furniture you sit on every day,” David announced, “Cleaning your cushions once a month can improve your respiration, stave off many different allergies—”

But if you clean too much, you can risk over-sterilization, especially with young kids. If they’re never subject to allergens and dust and dirt, they can become hypoallergenic. That’s why it’s better to put your kids in day-care.”

“He thinks he knows everything because he’s in an undergrad nursing program,” Peter said, still searching the house for Blackie. He opened the front door and turned the porch light on.

“Don’t turn that light on, it wastes electricity,” Jeremy said.

“Maybe Blackie will see it and come back.”

“And what? knock?”

“Should I do another cushion?” David asked.

“Do the sink now,” Jeremy said.

“How about a pillow?”

“All we really want done is the sink. This isn’t even our furniture.”

“I’ll do this pillow really quick,” David said, and immediately did. Jeremy gave Peter a puzzled look. Peter rolled his eyes and shrugged in resignation and gave up searching for the cat, who ran off because of the vacuum in the first place.

“Well, I can’t sit around all night watching a vacuum run, I gotta catch up on some stuff,” Jeremy said, standing up.

“What? I thought we were going to watch a movie.”

“Well we can’t watch a movie while Kirby’s here doing his magic tricks.”

“Neither can I. You’re the one who invited him in! You can’t just leave.”

“You opened the door! That’s why I never open the door.”

The door opened. It was Barry, with a grocery bag full of half-drunk bottles of wine in his arms. He paused in the doorway. David turned the vacuum off. The pillow remained stuck on the end of the hose.

“What’s all this?”

“This is Kirby, Peter’s friend,” Jeremy said and disappeared down the hall.

“Hi, I’m Barry,” he shifted the sack to one arm and shook the salesman’s hand, “How do you know Peter?”

“I’m doing a vacuum demonstration, actually. We just met.”

“Oh, I didn’t see your truck out front. Hey, can you do the sink thing? I’ve heard about that.”

“Hah, good luck,” Jeremy yelled invisibly from his bedroom down the hall.

“Or what about my mattress?” Barry asked excitedly.

“Yes, I can do that.” He yanked the pillow off the hose and followed Barry into the bedroom. This time he had to run the thing for a few minutes, because a mattress is so large. The filter darkened. David turned the machine off and it was quiet.

“Let’s see it,” Jeremy poked his head in.

“This is all the hair, dirt, and skin you have been sleeping on, sir.” Barry looked impressed.

“Can you get semen out too?” Jeremy asked.

Peter slipped out of the room, but didn't know where to go. He thought he might try to leave the house, go to the coffee shop or something to salvage the night. As he gathered his things into a backpack, the gang came back into the living room. Peter set down the backpack guiltily, not knowing if he should be guilty or not, if he is absolutely bound to the salesman or if he can just walk out the door without being questioned. He squeezed past David, the vacuum, Barry, and Jeremy in the hallway and unconsciously said, “I have to grab something real quick,” though he didn't have to grab anything and was only acting on an impulse of avoidance. In fact, he left his backpack in the living room, so he turned around and squeezed past them again, saying nothing, grabbed his backpack, then squeezed by the slow-moving group a third time, saying, with equal absentmindedness, “Just gonna set this over here.”

“Let's do the sink already,” Jeremy said, “That's the only worthwhile thing you can do here.”

“Okay okay,” David resigned, “but my boss has the sink attachment. I'll call him and tell him you're interested.”

“*Interested?*” Jeremy said, “We're not *interested*. We're not buying anything, we're just trying to help *you* out.”

He was already on the phone, having learned from Peter and Barry to ignore Jeremy. “Yep, they're interested, boss. The sink attachment. Okay. Thanks boss. Maybe not. Alright. See you then. Bye. Okay. Bye.”

The doorbell rang. Peter was standing next to the door. He froze. If this was David's boss, it would be hard to escape after answering the door. Jeremy was giving David a demonstration of how badly the sink drains. He looked at Peter. Damn. Peter opened the door. “Oh, hi Dana.”

“Well hello,” she cocked her head, “What is that look?”

“Hi, nothing, I thought you might be Kirby's boss.”

“What's this? Are you getting your carpets cleaned?” she stepped in past Peter. He had an impulse to slip out the front door.

“No, it's this guy doing a demo.”

“You let him in at eight at night? These things take forever, don't they?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I didn't see the van out front.”

“Yeah, I don't know. That's the thing. I just wanted to relax tonight... but his boss is down the street, I mean, I'm glad to help the guy, but this is getting ridiculous. He might fix our sink though.”

“Oh goody!” she joined the throng at the sink.

Alone for the moment, Peter took the opportunity to escape. He went into his room, sat down at the desk and grabbed a book. After reading the first sentence ten times, he closed the book and snatched his backpack. He quietly unlatched and opened the window. It was entirely nighttime now. A row of hedges guarded his window, about two feet out from it. Peter slipped out the window into the little alleyway between the house and the hedges and closed the window. He edged his way toward the front door, where the hedges end, with his back to the house.

A flash of light. A van pulled into the driveway. Peter froze. A large man in a white suit carrying a clipboard in one hand and what looked like a lead pipe in the other got out and walked up the driveway toward the house. His arms were as big as Peter's thighs. There wasn't enough time for Peter to turn around and get back through the window and there was no point in ducking since from the porch, a person could see all the way down the alley behind the hedges. He considered lying down, but if he were discovered lying down behind a hedge in the middle of the night, the scene would be too ridiculous to explain. Besides, Kirby Boss was now close enough to hear shuffling if Peter decided to move at all. The only thing left is to stay still. The porch light, of course, was on.

It's not that he was scared of the man. He posed no threat to Peter. Neither did his roommates or Dana. He was sure everyone would understand if he left. This only increased the strangeness of the scenario.

Kirby Boss arrived at the front door, glanced at his clipboard (presumably to double-check the house number) then back at the door (checks out), and knocked. As the man adjusted his posture and stared at the door, Peter realized how funny and strange it is to see a person existing by himself. There's something charming and pathetic, almost sad, about a man, especially a big burly man, just standing there, staring at a blank piece of wood, a door, from two feet away, with the bizarre expectation that his knocking on that wood will somehow advance the plot of his life.

Something in the bushes stirred. Kirby Boss looked. Peter looked. Blackie dropped from the roof onto the hedge and from the hedge down to Peter's feet. Peter looked up in time to see Kirby Boss jump. Jeremy opened the door. Peter instinctively turned and dashed back a few steps to his window, slid it open, and jumped in, hoping it was dark enough to leave unseen.

"Oh, God!" Kirby Boss yelled, dropping his clipboard, "there's someone back there."

Peter slowly, silently closed his window. He turned on a lamp and opened the book again, pretending to be reading. He could hear his heart beat loud in his ears and tried to control his breathing from that moment of action.

"What do mean there's someone back there?" Jeremy asked, peeking out the door toward where Kirby Boss was looking. He stepped out. "Hello? Anyone there?" Blackie jumped onto the doorstep. "Is this your guy? The cat scare you?"

"No, man, there was a guy standing there like a statue, frozen. Did he run off?"

"What? Are you serious?" Jeremy walked a couple steps out in that direction. "I don't see anyone. Are you sure it wasn't the cat?"

"I sure thought so."

"Huh. Well I don't know what to tell you, man. You can come in, I guess. Your boy's here."

Inside, Barry was setting up for an improv wine tasting. He works at a winery and most days he brings home a half-dozen left-over bottles of varying volume. Consequently, every social event involving Barry either begins or ends with a wine tasting.

"What's going on out there, Jeremy?" Dana asked, swirling a glass of '09 Chehalem Valley

Chardonnay (light pear, cedar, flowery finish).

“Someone was playing peek-a-boo with the Kirby man on the porch.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, laughing.

“Hey, where’s Peter?” Jeremy asked.

“I don’t know. I just peeked in his room and he wasn’t there.”

“Where else could he be? The sink’s over there, sir, let ‘er rip.” Kirby Boss began installing the sink attachment to the vacuum while his employee nervously slipped out of Barry’s tasting to help him. Jeremy went into Peter’s room, and there he was, reading away.

“Where have you been?”

“What do you mean? When?”

“Dana was looking for you. I found your cat. Are you okay? You look winded.” He put his hand on Peter’s forehead. “You’re hot.”

“No, I’m not. Stop pretending to be a nurse.”

“Did anyone run by your window a minute ago?”

“What?”

“Nothing. I dunno.”

“Are they almost done in there?” Peter said without looking up from the book he was pretending to read.

“Yeah, I hope so. It’s past my bedtime.”

Kirby Boss got a phone call and told David to pack up. He’d be right back. As he walked out to the van, he noticed he was walking a little bit faster than he would have normally.

Peter stopped staring at his book and followed Jeremy to Barry’s tasting. The van’s headlights turned on, changed angles, then moved out of view.

“Okay, the next one is a *Marechal Foch*, from August Cellars. Very woody, a bit leathery, but not like a Cab—more like if you were to dry tannins and turn them into jerky.”

Glug glug glug.

“Hey, Kirby’s still here?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes, I’m on my way out. So sorry to be so long. It’s the end of the week and my final deadline. Thank you for letting me in.”

“Well your boss just left. Are you walking?”

“No,” he said, chuckling. “He’ll come back.”

“Do you need some help with anything?”

“No, no, thank you. I should be fine,” he assured them, diligently rolling up cords and putting miscellaneous attachments into pouches. He rolled the vacuum out the door. They watched him through the window, lining up the machine and all the parts on the edge of the driveway in the night. David put his hands in his pockets then took them out, crossed his arms. Finally, he lit a cigarette.