

GEOFF KIRSCH

*A Dish Best Served Cold*

Instead of children, Dr. and Mrs. Ira A. Rosen, DDS had a tastefully well-appointed home on a full-acre spread in Dix Park, Long Island, with facilities enough for a whole dinner party to excuse itself at the same time. Theirs was a life of affluent complacency, prescription sunglasses and designer warm-up suits, defensive driving classes and synagogue social halls. The greatest obstacle they faced—either together or separately—was making alternate arrangements during the week the maid visited Ecuador each Christmas. That is, until Ira turned fifty.

First came the gadgets: the crepe-maker, the Juice Tiger, the double-basket deep-fat fryer. I wish you'd consulted me, was all Barbara Rosen said, silently resolving to keep those eyesores well-hidden in a closet. Next was the sports memorabilia. Whatever pleasure he found filling up the guest room with box after box of unopened baseball cards, she neither shared nor understood. But this battle, too, Barbara chose not to pick. Phase or no phase, she trusted the man—he wouldn't bring anything too ungodly into their house. Then he installed a home entertainment center, which vomited sound all over the ground floor. He bought a Jaguar. He drafted schematics for a hideous carport, proposing to pave over her proud little azalea garden. Here's where it stops, Barbara finally decided, but it was like barring the gates after the castle had been stormed—her husband the orthodontist was dropping her for a shikse.

It began as a tryst, Dr. Rosen explained. He sprang the subject one evening over egg rolls and Kung Pao chicken, brought-in from Asia Garden West on Jericho Turnpike. Usually, Barbara ordered from just plain Asia Garden, also on Jericho. But walking to the car earlier that afternoon, encumbered by Ira's dry cleaning, she caught the gaze of a pleasant little man in chef toques, out there hawking coupons. That's Dix Park for you: not a town, really, but a portion of Island-long commercial strip that offers eight different places to get lo mein. And deli. And bagels. Pizza? Forget about it, choose from ten, all of them good, and all of them locked in an endless war for customers, firing promotional giveaway after promotional giveaway at a class of people

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who'd eat take-out six nights a week regardless. Still, it was rather charming how he'd helped her to the car, and what the hell? She could shake things up, too—albeit less bombastically.

He didn't intend it to get so serious, so fast, Dr. Rosen said, and then he said some other things, all the while picking out the shrimp from a mound of twelve-ingredient fried rice, which he then placed, neat-rowed, onto a napkin. It just happened, he said. I love you, but, he said. Et cetera, et cetera, he said, though not in so many words. When he was done, he rolled up the napkin and buried it in the trash.

"So what are you telling me?" Barbara said.

"I'm not sure how to phrase it," he answered.

A protective instinct grabbed hold of Barbara. She began to look at her kitchen, really look at it, the vaulted ceiling, the deep-stained cabinetry, the fully-stocked Sub Zero in matching cherry finish. Attempts at family grounded years ago, she'd redirected her love into the house. Sure, Ira's wherewithal was in there somewhere, but the place was mostly a reflection of Barbara's mannered sensibility and tireless devotion. Down to the Chagall lithographs. Down to the custom-tailored draperies. Down to the wooden curtain rods she'd contracted special from Vermont, each one naturally hollow, the artisan said and she'd never forget, using a painstaking process developed by Aborigines. To complete it took half a decade and countless runs to Brattleboro, but *kine-ahora*, Barbara thought, the set was magnificent. Ira hadn't even told her the shikse's name—probably Chrissie, or Christie, or Kristy with a K and a Y. There's no worse feeling than to be threatened in your home by an unseen force.

"I just think," Ira continued. "I just think—is there any duck sauce left?"

The center island was strewn with greasy-bottomed paper bags and half-empty cartons. A complimentary quart of Happy Family sat congealing on its sleek Formica surface, the whole damn mess of it mirrored back at her in a night-blackened bay window. Shock had given way to anger; tears later, yes, but for now, anger.

"No, Ira, you used it all."

She had see-through braces, the shikse. That's how they met: Dr. Rosen wired her up on the house. Well, okay, she had compensated him, in her own way and on multiple occasions. But money never changed hands. He'd mentioned that, too. That, and how the shikse

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