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Roasted Almonds

by William Powley

It was Dierdre's first day on her new job. It was Monday. She had spent the whole afternoon packing Florida oranges into cardboard boxes. She loved her job. She made seven dollars an hour. She was walking home to her husband, Ike, to tell him the good news. He would love her. She wanted that.

Dierdre walked near Miami Beach toward her apartment. Ike would be there waiting. She watched the jet surfers ride the waves. Girls popped off their bikinis as they lay chest down in the white sand.

She remembered her job. She could eat all the oranges she wanted during her breaks. She had eaten ten today.

"It's a nice day. It's a good day for a new job," she had said to her boss.

"It is the best day of a new career," he had replied.

Her job was not hard. But it was no easy task to organize oranges into a box.

"Thirty in each box," the boss had said.

Her responsibility was simple. She picked the firmest and ripest oranges from a large metal bin, attached a plastic sticker to the bright skin, and counted thirty, loading the oranges carefully. She sent the box down a black conveyer belt to where a lid would be stapled on.

Dierdre kept walking. Boys ran on the beach, played volleyball, drank Coors, and helped girls dry off with long white towels. She

was close to her apartment. She could see the large window which overlooked the bay.

Her husband, Ike, would be home from work. He had a steady job. He was construction worker. He built skysrise towers in Miami. He had spent his whole day walking the steel girders, a thousand feet above the ground.

“Man, it’s hot,” he would say to the foreman during lunch.

“Damn right,” the foreman would answer.

Ike spent summers working as a lifeguard at the beach. He was careful to tan his body, oil, tan, and oil. He had helped save lives. He was in construction. He made money. He had met Dierdre on the beach patrol three years ago. They got married at the end of the summer.

In the shade of the orange trees Dierdre crossed the street where the apartment stood. She listened to the seagulls fly overhead. They were free. She was happy. Her new job will make her and Ike happy. She pushed the buzzer for the apartment. In a few seconds, it clicked open. Ike was home. She ran up the stairs.

The roasted almonds were in a round wooden bowl that was warm and smooth.

Ike liked to eat almonds when he watched Monday Night Football.

“How’s the job?” Ike said, as Dierdre walked in.

“Good,” she said. “Actually, great.”

He savored the salt on his tongue and liked the edge it gave to the cold Coors. His fingers made damp, shining prints on the frosted glass as he put it down. The television glowed.

“Marino drops back to pass . . . it’s complete at the thirty-two yard line. First down.”

Ike tipped some more almonds into his cupped hand, glancing constantly from bowl to television screen.

Dierdre watched him. She could tell him later about her first day at work. She like to look at him even after three years of marriage. She enjoyed touching the contours of his face and watching the expressions change with every play on the television: his arms, his eyes, his mouth.

“The Dolphins are driving. They need a touchdown. It’s crucial.”

Ike’s mouth was relaxed now, tiny particles of salt clinging to the hard edges of his upper lip. She experimented with her own sharp, pink tongue, running it across her lips, wondering how it would feel to lean over and lick his, then gently force it between his lips, to touch his teeth, his tongue. She looked quietly at his eyes, embarrassed, in case he was looking at her and could guess her thoughts. There was no need to worry. His forehead was creased with concentration as he watched every move on the flickering screen. He groped for his glass, transferring the nuts from his hand to his mouth.

“It’s third down and twelve yards to go. The Bills will be in a nickel defense.”

Dierdre giggled silently. She remembered the first time a boy had put his tongue in her mouth.

It was her first dance, her first kiss. She hadn’t wanted to kiss him. She really didn’t like him, but it seemed expected of her. Afterward she had gone to the restroom, feeling sick and violated, scrubbing her mouth with a paper towel, washing it with soap before she repaired the damage done to her lipstick.

Ike had laughed when she told him about it, after they were married, and she had been able to laugh too. Then he held her and kissed her and put his tongue in her mouth. They made love. She felt the weakness in her legs, the warming blood. She remembered it all. “I didn’t know,” she had wanted to tell him.

Ike’s hands were slim and brown, curling gently around his supply of roasted almonds. She thought of taking his wrist,

uncurling his fingers over the bowl, emptying them, brushing them, placing them over her breast. He munched steadily. Watched. Exclaimed. Forgot her.

“Marino sets up behind center. He takes the snap. He drops back. The Bills come on a blitz . . .”

“I’ve changed a lot,” she wanted to say, hating the upbringing that had made it so difficult for them to talk about sex, needs, or love. Maybe it was because she had been so shy and inexperienced that Ike didn’t seem so keen anymore. “I’m sorry,” she said silently, wanting to let him know she was ready to love him.

The magazines at her hairdresser’s had shocked her at first. “How to love a man,” she had read and didn’t want to let anyone know what she was reading. But she kept turning the pages. The words excited her.

Dierdre looked at his lips again, at the sweet, deep corners, wanting them. He looked steadily at the mud-stained players in their helmets and shoulder gear.

“ . . . over the middle . . . it’s caught. Hill is at the fifteen, the ten, the five, and he’s down at the three yard line. First and goal.”

Automatically, she reached into the bowl, conscious of the fragmented smoothness, the clinging salt, took a handful, began to nibble, then suddenly became aware of Ike’s eyes looking at her, cold with distaste.

“That’s disgusting, you know.”

“What is?”

“Putting your hand in the bowl.”

“What do you mean?”

“You put the same hand up to your mouth, then dip it into the bowl again. A man doesn’t feel like eating anymore. Couldn’t you have tipped them into your hand like I do?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

She took a tissue. She wiped the salt from her hands and scrubbed the salt from her lips.