

SO JUST SO

By John Kuligowski

WHY WE LIKE IT: *What impressed us most about this superbly realized flash is the way the characters seem to merge into object-hood—each becoming a numbing de-personalized entity in a world, environment, of escalating absences. The routines of ordinary living are disengaged of meaning and a sense of accustomed entrapment defines a relationship that is more dispassionate osmosis than love, even symbiotic love. The second person present singular POV distances the narrator from the characters and assumes something like the voice of conscience. The prose, deceptively simple, is fine tuned to a perfect pitch. Quote: ‘Like an angst-stricken middle-schooler, he just nudged and worried things on his plate. After a while you’d dismiss him from the table, and he’d go to his study where he drank single malt scotch.’*

You were living like a refugee then—a comfortably middle-class refugee, but a refugee nonetheless. Always awaiting the next disaster, you asked yourself, Wheat bread or rye? Which wattage of light bulbs? Poultry or beef, and what for dessert?

A fusillade of options assaulted you up and down the gleaming aisles of the supermarket. You’d take survey and wait for an epiphany. All the labels looked the same. Everything was hermetically sealed. You’d begin to throw items into the cart in a hopeless, desultory way. You thought every option as good as the next, and there’s a kernel of truth to that notion; Tom would simply stare at the meal you’d prepared. He’d begun to bald then, and he’d never lost the desperate, cagy look you saw develop over night when he turned thirty-eight. Like an angst-stricken middle-schooler, he just nudged

and worried things on his plate. After a while, you'd dismiss him from the table, and he'd go to his study where he drank single malt scotch.

Then you crossed another border—but was it he or you? In either case, you eventually forced your way into Tom's skin. Remember the feel of your acrylic nails entering his flesh like the tines of a serving fork into a freshly steaming roast? You laughed when the smell of strong booze poured out. The scotch had long since become a kind of febrile passion with him, but, after that, it was *yours*. He'd take three hours doing dishes and tidying up the kitchen (and there was no reason it should take so long). That had once been your febrile passion. When he'd finished tidying, he'd gaze out the window at the myriad flowers beneath the suburban streetlights. Almost time, he'd think. Everything so just so, he'd walk upstairs.

You always dissembled unconsciousness on the floor in his study, and, always, the nine-millimeter and the empty tumbler that had held his beloved scotch were beside you. He never asked if the gun was loaded (though you were). He covered you with an old quilt each night, and, in the morning, you would kiss Tom and tell him that you didn't know what was wrong with you then, but now (*right now*) you loved him. Over morning coffee and toast, he'd confess with the most impassive of expressions that for the first period in his life, he'd found that he was genuinely happy.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I have a great deal of respect for literary works that in some way play with the concept of ambiguity. For me, ambiguity lends extra dimensions to a work; just beyond or behind the concrete details of the story, an intimation of something else can be felt by the reader, and in the most successful cases, this other frustrates a succinct and straight forward expression. The Russian formalist school would likely have described this as something akin to defamiliarization.*

What I attempted in this piece was to defamiliarize a suburban couple's life through the ambiguity of the two characters' relationship with each other, and ultimately, even their identities.

My literary influences are far and wide, really. During my formative teenage years, I was encyclopedic regarding the Beats. These days I find myself examining and re-examining Beckett, Saramago and Kafka.

BIO: John Kuligowski currently lives in the Midwest. His work has appeared (in no particular order) in *Word Riot*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Maudlin House*, *Unlikely 2.0*, *The Northville Review* and several others. He has a weird fascination with semiotics, and capitalism leaves a really bad taste in his mouth.