

The Brass Teapot by Tim Macy

eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/BrasTeap.shtml

"I'm sorry...." He started to say as he took her hand to kiss it. A clanging emanated from inside the car. Like someone tapping on a brass kettle.

When Alice's finger stopped throbbing she picked up the teapot, removed the top and saw that inside was five quarters.

"Practically paid for itself," she remarked.

Still, John was annoyed when she insisted on setting it on the stove.

For days he felt disrupted by its presence in their otherwise modern kitchen. They had overhauled everything when the children moved out. They got a fridge with two doors and a self-cleaning flat-surface oven. If they had known the children were going to lose their scholarships and that Alice would be demoted, they would have never done it. In three years it would all be paid for and the warranties would simultaneously expire.

John was most aggravated when Alice decided to make their morning coffee using the brass teapot.

"The electric one's broken," she reported.

John watched her, standing in her business suit; her graying hair pulled into a neat ponytail, as she clumsily boiled water and added coffee grounds.

"I've never done it this way," she said, stirring with a plastic spoon that bent in the boiling heat. John tried to show her the right way to do it, but it was too early to be giving orders. Neither was in a good mood until they had coffee and breakfast. Kisses, hugs, any affections came after food and caffeine.

"You've got to stir it...like this," he said. He dipped a metal spoon into the cavernous depths of the darkening teapot. She looked away, like she always did when John was correcting her.

"No you don't!" she snapped. She pushed his hand out of the way, causing the pot to lurch and send one boiling wave cresting onto John's exposed wrist. He yelped, climbed into the kitchen chair and poked at the tender pink skin until his wife brought him an ice pack.

"It's going to blister," she said, applying the ice. He nodded and the two didn't speak until after she'd poured the coffee and he'd set out toast for each of them.

"What time do you think you'll be home tonight?" she asked.

"Late," he replied. There were shipments coming in from all over the country and he alone could work the new processing system for incoming orders. There was one other person, an up-and-coming woman straight out of college, but John preferred to do it himself. If she proved her worth too quickly he might find himself out of a job.

With his last gulp of coffee, just before he was going to stand up and kiss his wife goodbye, John found something floating in his mouth.

"Did you wash this thing out?"

"Of course. It's clean."

He pulled out some paper that had adhered to the roof of his mouth. It was a two-dollar bill.

"What the hell is this then?" he asked.

They both bent over the kitchen table where John laid the bill out to dry. Neither of the two could explain the presence of the money except to say that Alice must have missed it somehow when she was cleaning, though she swore she had scrubbed every angle of the brass teapot.

The two soon embraced for a long kiss, both regretting the fighting they had done over the long weekend. Alice's tongue snuck in through John's slightly parted lips. He squirmed with genuine surprise. His burned wrist brushed against his wife's cotton top as he reached to put his hand beneath it. He yelped again from the raw pain.

A nickel dropped in the teapot.

The two bent over and stared in wonder. John picked it out, held it up to the light.

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Alice reached over and pinched her husband's arm as hard as she could. Before he could cry out or push her hand away, there was the sound of dimes dropping in the teapot.

"How did that happen?" John asked.

"Hit me," she said.

He stared at her.

"Don't knock me out or anything. Punch me in my arm. Hard enough to leave a bruise."

John wouldn't hit her. Instead, he picked up his briefcase and headed for the front door.

"If I'm late they're going to let *her* handle the shipments. We can't afford for me to miss out on all of this overtime. We have tuition to pay in less than a month."

He kissed Alice and closed the door behind him.

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The routine was that Alice made dinner because she got home first ever since her demotion from accountant to glorified messenger. John made breakfast and handled all of the meals on the weekends. When John returned home that night, however, there wasn't the smell of any cooking in the air.

He found his wife lying on the couch, the teapot resting on her stomach. It was late, after ten, he had told his boss that he could handle things alone and told him to send *her* home because she would only be in the way. Without any help, it took him hours longer than it should have to finish processing the shipments.

John's stomach grumbled painfully at the lack of ready food. He hadn't eaten since toast at breakfast, there had been no time. The bile that churned, and had been churning everyday for months, had created an ulcer in John's stomach. His knees ached from standing for hours at a time.

The living room was dark, except for some light flickering out of the muted television set.

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"What are you doing?" he asked, turning on the overhead light.

She tried to hide her face with a pillow from the couch, but he saw the bruise and the swelling.

"What happened?"

Alice's right eye was bloated, colored a dark purple. There was only a slit that she could peer out of. He ran to the kitchen and got the ice pack out of the freezer, laid it against her eye.

She jumped up, said it was too sensitive and asked him to wrap a towel around it first.

"Did someone attack you? Do I need to call the police?"

His heart beat in his ears. Beneath the worries that his wife might suffer a hemorrhage

and die was the worry about the impending hospital bill. They had been forced to stop making the payments on Alice's health insurance since her company had doubled employee responsibility.

"No," she replied.

She handed John the teapot. He removed the lid and saw inside it three ten dollar bills.

"I hit myself with the iron," she said. She looked ashamed but was determined to tell him the truth. "It gave me ten dollars. I did it two more times." She told him that she thought it might eventually be more.

"We've got to get you to a hospital."

She refused.

"The swelling will go down." After a long, heavy breath, after resting her throbbing head on her husband's shoulder, she suggested they use the money to go out to eat.

The thought of food, of a restaurant, which they couldn't afford anymore, was enough for John to forget the strangeness of his wife hitting herself in the face with an iron, if only momentarily.

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"I will think better on a full stomach," he ruminated.

As they gathered their things to go out to dinner, Alice took the teapot and held it close to her stomach. He asked her to leave it behind, but she refused.

"What if someone broke in and stole it?" she asked.

She set it on the table at the restaurant, much to the confusion of the waiter who eyeballed John like he was an abusive husband. It was the first time anyone had ever suspected him capable of violence.

"What do you think we're going to do with that?" he asked, after he devoured his salad. They went to the Italian place where they used to go on birthdays and holidays. It was their favorite.

"I don't know," she admitted. Little droplets of white pus sneaked out of an opening beneath the bottom lid of her eye. John dabbed at it with his napkin after wetting it in his water glass.

"I just know that we've got an opportunity here...."

"Opportunity?"

The waiter returned with their meals. John got the veal on top of pasta, Alice had a sample plate consisting of a small portion of several things on the menu. They didn't speak as they ate. At Alice's job there was no time for lunch that day either. She ran memos around a huge office building, going up stairs and down long hallways all day long. They wouldn't let her wear sneakers because of the dress code so her feet were always blistered. The pay was much less than what she had received as a full-time accountant, a job she lost because of her tendency to make mathematical errors. Reportedly, she had cost the company millions by misfiling a tax return for an important client.

When the bill came it was over thirty dollars. The two hadn't been to the restaurant in so long that the prices had risen and they hadn't even looked at their menus.

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"We could put it on the Discover," John suggested.

"It's maxed."

They sat in silence. They were eleven dollars short of even being able to pay the check, much less leave a tip. The trip to see their daughter over the long weekend had eaten what was left of their checking, with gas and giving her extra money. Payday was still three days away.

"I could write a check and...."

"No checks," she said, pointing to a sign in the window of the restaurant. John's ulcer screamed within his stomach, no longer satisfied by the warm, nourishing food.

After a few moments of avoiding eye contact with the waiter, John took the teapot with him into the men's room. He locked the door behind him, thankful that it was a bathroom for one person only, and he proceeded to punch his fist into the wall. At first, his tentativeness profited him only in small change, dimes and nickels. He counted after five strikes into the porcelain tiling of the wall. There was not quite three dollars, though his fingers were red and burning.

He drove his kneecap into the sink as hard as he could make himself. The pain sent icy blood in every direction starting at his heart. Toppling over, he leered into the teapot. A five dollar bill. With every ounce of his courage he ran the water as hot as it would go, sitting on the bathroom floor to the right of the spigot, and he held his hand beneath it for twenty seconds while it burned his skin. With his eyes tightly shut, he listened to the sound of quarters dropping until he was sure that he finally had enough.

Alice was embarrassed to pay with so much change. As they left, she tried not to look at the other diners who stared at them. She propped up her mysteriously wounded husband, searching for the front door through her one good eye.

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John had passed out on the couch not long after they returned home. Alice tinkered for a bit in the kitchen. He could hear whispers of "ow" and "shit" coming from the room, followed by the sound of change sprinkling into brass.

In the morning he realized he had overslept. Normally he would've been in his bed where the alarm was set, but in the living room all was silent. It was ten a.m. Alice was unaccounted for, as was the teapot. John rushed into work where they told him to go ahead and take the day off. They told him he looked "beat up." *She* could handle it on her own. She'd already proven that in less than two hours of processing shipments.

Dejected, John returned home to find his wife also not working.

"Why are you home?" she asked. He stared into her face. The noon sunlight made her face look even worse than it had in the restaurant.

"Why didn't you wake me up before you left this morning?" he asked.

She told him that she hadn't left that morning. She had accidentally knocked herself out in the garage when one of the hanging shovels had fallen on her head.

John felt around her skull until his fingers reached the bump.

"I'm fine," she said.

"We have to stop this!" he shouted. He forcefully took the teapot out of her arms and put it on top of a kitchen cupboard, where she couldn't reach. Undeterred, she scooted a chair over and took it down.

"We have an opportunity to finally get ahead!" she screamed back. This time she would not let him take the teapot from her grasp.

"Get ahead?" He explained to her that the only way they were going to get ahead was if they both worked their overtime. "Today's already set us back...."

≤ 9 ≥

"We'll never get ahead, John. We never have and we never will. The moment we get any money something breaks or one of the children...."

They argued for an hour, Alice the entire time clutching the closed teapot. She called him a loser three times during the fight and he once, out of frustration, told her that she had been a bad mother. It was the dirtiest they had ever treated one another. When they finished, when both were hunched over in exhaustion from not having eaten breakfast, Alice lifted the lid to find the teapot filled with twenty dollar bills. There was just over four hundred dollars.

"But how?" John asked.

Alice reared back and spit in his face. She then told him how she came home for lunch whenever she could in hopes that the postman would be walking his route and say hello to her.

A twenty dollar bill appeared, though John was too hunched over to see it.

"Now you do me!" she said.

"You're a bitch!" he said. Change clinked.

"No! Do me for real. Tell me something that you hate about me or something awful that you've done. Something that will really hurt my feelings."

John thought as he sat at the table, still trying to form the picture of what their postman looked like.

"I slept with Ellen Waterson...."

"I already know that," she interrupted.

"I slept with her after you and I were dating," he said spitefully.

It had been a secret. Words festering beneath John's skin for twenty years. He could smell the words at night while he was lying in bed, next to Alice. Mildewed, damp, green words under his skin but not in his blood.

≤ 10 ≥

Her face was pale but a smile crept onto it as she looked in the teapot and saw a fifty dollar bill appear.

"Keep going," she said.

The two proceeded to tell one another everything. Things which no married couple have ever shared. John told her about the woman at work, the one who might be replacing him, and how wonderfully upright her breasts were. Alice told him about the men she had been with before him and the things she had allowed them to do that she would never allow

John to do to her. They did still love one another and by the end of the day the pot had given them over a thousand dollars. More than either of them could make in a week at their job.

They continued on the next day, after shouting at one another so furiously that they had each finally retreated to their corners and cried themselves to sleep. John got a call on the fourth day from his boss saying that he shouldn't bother coming in again. That *she* could handle it.

"Fine," John replied. "I've found something else anyway." His boss was surprised at the lack of emotion. Alice, too, decided to not return to her employer. Though they were running short on secrets and genuine insults - insincere insults didn't pay a dime - they had still worked up enough money to get by for months.

Each morning they woke up late, sometimes not until after noon, typically alone, and they met at the kitchen table where they set the teapot in between them.

"I always referred to you as loose when we were in high school," John said.

Clank. Clank. Clank.

"You have never given me an orgasm," Alice replied.

Three twenty dollar bills.

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Alice was learning to predict how much money would be in the teapot by the recoiling countenance of her husband. The insults, the beatings, the degradations were having a slightly more permanent effect on him. His face was beginning to not spring back.

By the third month the teapot was rewarding them with less and less money each day. Alice had begun reverting to slamming her fingers in the cupboards to reach the minimum amount needed to survive. The two figured if they could get at least a hundred dollars a day from the teapot, they would be fine.

When their eldest daughter called them that third month to inform them that she was coming home for a weekend visit, Alice tried to gently suggest that she not come. The girl wouldn't listen. She showed up on their doorstep the very next night, not expecting what she saw.

When she entered her childhood home, things were different. The pictures that had been on the mantle were smashed. Some by fists, others by emotions. Her mother's hair was short, cropped close to the head. She told her daughter that she had wanted something

different, but honestly she had been pulling it out by the fistful for money to the point where she had to shave it to get it all one even length again.

The girl's father was the biggest surprise. His hair had gone gray and he was heavier than he'd ever been before. The two had been eating well and never getting any exercise. They never wanted to leave the teapot, to miss a moment when they might make a little money.

As she sat on the couch, drinking a cup of tea, staring at the changed environment in wonder, she began telling them stories of her classes and her professors. Normally, they would've listened intently. They would've had questions or comments about the girl's stories, but neither spoke. Both Alice and John were thinking of the teapot which was sitting, waiting on the coffee table in front of them.

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When the girl picked it up both parents lunged at her and pulled it from her hands.

"It's an antique," Alice commented, setting it back down gently on the coffee table.

"What happened to your eye, Mom?" the girl asked. There were four separate scars if one looked closely, but there was one brutal gash from where she'd struck herself with the iron that was noticeable at any distance.

"That's nothing. I fell," she said. The words in her mouth formed like "thank you" and "hello".

Alice looked at her daughter's unpinched, uncut, unbeaten skin with greedy eyes. When she hugged her, just before climbing the stairs to go to bed, Alice pinched her daughter beneath her arms and on her back.

"What'd you do that for?" the girl yelled. The sound of change clanging in the pot went unnoticed to her.

"Sorry," her mother said, disappointed by the familiar sound of nickels.

As she handed the girl her suitcase, Alice banged it into her daughter's still sensitive shin. She howled and hobbled about for a few moments while her mother apologized over the promising sound of sprinkling quarters.

John and Alice waited for their daughter to go out with her high school friends or to go to bed at night before starting their ritual of insults and physical attacks. When the girl asked in the morning what had happened, why her mother's lip was swollen, the two remained quiet.

The girl left on Sunday, earlier than she had planned, because her mother had tripped and accidentally pushed her down the staircase while walking behind her. Her elbow might have had a small fracture and she wanted to go home to take advantage of the college's medical facilities. She thought it was strange that neither parent offered gas money.

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"You shouldn't have done that," John said, as they smiled and waved.

"It's fifty dollars that we're going to use to pay for her education!"

With all of their secrets scattered about their modest home, covered in broken glass and splintered wood, the two were forced to go back to beating themselves. John called his old boss and begged for his job on his boss's voicemail, but his calls were never returned.

The tuition bills came every three months, they were on the payment plan. In addition to that there was the electric bill, the mortgage, the water and the credit cards. Not to mention the fact that they had to take Alice to the emergency room to treat a concussion that she had given herself with one of the garage shovels.

A policeman had visited John in the waiting room and asked him questions. He had written John's answers into a little notebook and showed John pictures of Alice's bruises.

"She fell?" the policeman asked.

John nodded his head and stared off in the other direction.

At the end of each week John took a giant bucket of change to the bank to be counted out and returned in bills. The change was even diminishing. They had begun to expect four hundred dollars a week in change, but it soon dwindled to two hundred and fifty.

"The fridge doesn't work," Alice reported.

"What? Why not?" John asked, returning from a disappointing trip to the bank.

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe because you punched it a thousand times."

Her attitude was changing with each new day. John suspected that she had given herself another concussion the week before when she'd "slipped" in the shower and he had to pull her unconscious body, dangling, crimson, wet head to the bed. She said it was an accident, but the teapot had been suspiciously in the room with her. They had found through trial and error that the teapot only worked when it was within a certain range of the person being wounded.

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"So you're blaming me for the refrigerator being broken," he asked her. "What about the car? I could blame you for the shattered windshield."

Her skin was bluish, pale. Her eyes had no white, only red and green. Sleep deprivation gave a little bit of money, but that wasn't why she lay there awake at night. She was in pain. Her head ached endlessly but she refused to go back to the doctor, saying that they would never get ahead if they had to pay yet another hospital bill.

When the repairman came to work on the refrigerator he informed them that their warranty didn't cover the damage. Alice exploded in the man's face. He was short, bald, heavy. On his fingers were rings, gold and silver. He wore long blue overalls with a nametag that read "Randy."

"Miss, I don't make the rules...." he started to say.

John, dabbing at an injury on his chin that wouldn't stop bleeding, walked in on his wife striking the man on his head with a wooden spoon. He was older, slow from his weight and had a limp in his right leg.

"Alice!" John yelled. He pulled her off of the heavy man who was covering his face with his hands. The clank of the wooden spoon hitting his rings had played in unison with the change rattling in the teapot.

Alice lurched at the recoiled man with her feet, John having hold of her top half. Her foot planted firmly on the man's nose, breaking it instantly. Blood roared out of his nostrils, onto his lips and eventually onto the already blood-stained floor.

"You're crazy!" he screamed at her. "You're wife's a crazy bitch!" He covered his face with his hand.

"She's not crazy," John responded calmly.

John walked over to the teapot and pulled out a newly formed hundred dollar bill. He handed it to the repairman.

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"Will you fix it for this?" he asked.

The man laughed.

"I'm taking you to court. My nose is broken!"

John leered at Alice. Her bluish skin basked in the kitchen light. The phone rang somewhere in the distance, but no one heard it. All anyone could hear, including the repairman, was the tearing sound of the knife Alice pushed into the repairman's stomach.

Both of his hands reached to the handle, to pull it out, but Alice pushed it in farther and turned it like she had seen done in movies.

"What the hell did you do?" John yelled.

Immediately he started thinking about what they would do with the body. How could he protect her from this?

The fat man's body fell to the kitchen floor in two stages. Some undead portion of his spine tried to stay upright, while his thighs and ankles wanted to lay flat and be deceased. Alice kicked him to the ground once before his heart stopped beating.

"What the hell did you do?" John asked again.

She got down next to him, stabbed him three or four more times, in hopes that he could still feel the pain. She then lifted herself, John standing horrified in the corner, and walked over to the teapot. She lifted the lid. A blood-spattered smile charmed across her face.

"Look at this!" she said. She held the pot out for him to see, though he didn't look. It was full of hundreds. Stuffed full of hundreds.

"You killed a man!" John yelled. In a panic he looked out the kitchen window. There was no one in sight. "We'll have to get his body into his work truck outside. See if you can find his keys."

≤ 16 ≥

John went to grab towels out of the bathroom to mop up the blood. When he returned she was at the man again with her knife.

"It doesn't work after they're dead," she said.

"Can you help me?" he asked.

He had taken out several cleaning agents.

"We've got to do something with him before people know he's missing."

Alice wasn't listening. She was staring into the now empty pot.

"We could buy our way to paradise," she whispered. "There's got to be fifteen neighbors in houses right around here that trust us. Don across the street has a gun in his closet. He keeps it loaded."

He had shown both of them on the fourth of July.

"This is over ten thousand dollars," she said, fumbling through the unchanging faces of Benjamin Franklin. "We could buy our way to Paradise," she repeated.

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