

Because It Is Bitter And Because It Is My Heart

by
Joyce Carol Oates

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Chapter 5
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by Joyce Carol Oates¹

[Ellipsis in the original]

Persia stares at Duke Courtney, who is unshaven, tieless, a soiled look to his best white shirt, a cheapness to the gold flash of cuff links. He's home at the wrong hour of the day.

A gusty whitely glowing November day. She'll remember.

He has just informed her that they are in debt. He has borrowed money not only from the loan company that financed their 1953 four-door Mercury sedan but from a second loan company...has borrowed money from his brother Leslie...and from friends of whom, in several instances, Persia has never before heard. Duke has been forced to confess since, today, embarrassingly, before noon, he is obliged to drive their car, the very car he requires for his job as a salesman, to the loan company headquarters uptown. Such words as "repossessing," "default," "in lieu of," resound like drunken song lyrics in her head.

My God. Duke has even borrowed money from Madelyn.

"But the poor woman works in that terrible beauty salon...she doesn't have any money!"

"Maddy wanted to go in with me on a bet at the Downs," Duke says evasively, running a hand through his hair. "It wasn't exactly a loan. Only seventy-five dollars."

He smiles one of his reflex smiles. His nostrils are wider and darker than Persia recalls. In his fair, thin-skinned, handsome face, the narrow-bridged nose is becoming swollen and venous.

"Strictly speaking, we both lost. The bet." He smiles again. "But I repaid the loan."

"You repaid it? You did?"

"I said I did."

"How much do you owe? I mean...in all." Persia is frightened but tries to keep her voice level. Though their daughter is at school she has a perilous sense that there is a third party in the flat with them, listening.

"Why does it matter, Persia, how much? A sum."

They are standing in the kitchen, a formal space between them. Persia in her pink quilted bathrobe, a surprise gift, and a luxury gift too, from Duke, on a Valentine's Day long past. Going grimy at the cuffs, frayed at the hem. Persia is barefoot and almost naked beneath the robe. Begins to feel the linoleum-tiled floor tilt under her feet..like the teakwood deck of that gleaming white yacht *Erin Maid*.

Since confiscated, among other items, by the Hammond City Council.

Duke is trying to joke. "*We* owe, darling. Not just me. You've spent most of it yourself, in fact— groceries, clothes. Thing Iris 'simply has to have.'"

"But how much?"

"Not all that much?"

"Duke, honey, please"— Persia's voice begins to falter— "how much?"

Duke sighs; rummages through a drawer for a pencil and a note pad; scribbles down the

¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart* (New York: Penguin/Plume, 1991) pp.43 - 46.

figure to show Persia as if the numeral is too shameful, or too intimate, to be disclosed orally. Persia whispers, "Oh, God." She yanks out a chair, sits blindly at the kitchen table, her hair, having endured elaborate pin curls through the night, now suddenly limp, straggling in her face. She hasn't put on any makeup yet this morning, so her skin is ivory pale, glazed. Without lipstick her lips look unnatural.

"And all this went for cards? At the racetrack?"

"And in a business investment. I tried to explain." Duke fetches a bottle of Jack Daniel's from the cupboard, pours each of them a drink in a whisky glass. His manner is edgy but controlled. "Also, honey, as I said, household expenses. Life isn't cheap these days."

"But your job—"

"Never mind about my job."

"Your commissions. Didn't you tell me—"

"Persia, the money went. Money *goes*."

He pauses, smiling at her. He is standing, Persia is sitting. His is the advantage of the natural actor who inhabits, not only his own body, with consummate ease, but the larger, invisible, indefinable body of the space about him. Watching Duke Courtney, though they have been married nearly fourteen years, have been joined together in lovemaking more times than Persia could wish to calculate, she feels her hair stir at the nape of her neck as if it were being caressed.

Duke says, "Hey. Love. My love. You know we love each other." He touches her as if shyly. Touches her breasts, loose inside the quilted robe. "That's the main thing, Persia."

"Is it?"

"Isn't it?"

"The main thing?"

Duke picks up his glass and drinks, nudges Persia to join him. It is a lover's gesture: wordless, yet edged with reproach. More urgent than Persia wants to acknowledge.

But Persia doesn't drink. Not just yet. She is thinking— or, rather, the thought is forcing itself upon her— that the figure Duke scribbled on the notepaper is probably a lie.

Her eyes veer wildly, she makes an abrupt rising movement, for an instant, Duke thinks she is going to hit him...but instead she embraces him, arms tight and crushing around his waist, warm face pressed against his chest. Her smell is that of something being crushed in a moist fist.