

Late

by Shabs Rajan

“I’m late,” says my wife, tugging at the roll too hard, and the holder detaches from the wall and falls to the floor with a clang.

I pause my brushing, adding another item to the fix-the-goddamn-house list in my head.

“Late for what?” I ask, spitting paste and foam all over her reflection in the mirror.

“Late,” she replies, turning to me, eyebrows raised.

I stop poking at a rather large chunk of meat lodged between my teeth. “You mean...?”

As if the theatrics weren’t enough, she says, “Yes. That. Late.”

Thick white foam slides out of my mouth, making me look like a rabid dog.

“But...,” I say, “how?” It sounds pathetic even to me.

She maintains the hard stare; her eyebrows seem to lift further, nestling like centipedes among the lines in her forehead.

Oh crap, I think. I’m fifty. I can’t bend down to pick up pa ball, let alone kick it. This is not good.

Later, after we’ve argued every possible angle—the time and date of the crime (the location, inevitably, the dull bedroom), menopause, whether we keep it, the reliability of over-the-counter tests, and my ill-judged comment about her not being careful enough—she refuses to go down to the pharmacy below the flat and buy a test.

I pace outside the bedroom, scrolling through ChatGPT on pregnancy test accuracy and brands I’ve never heard of, and somehow find myself thinking that Durex should have diversified into this area.

“It’s better if you get it”, I hear myself pleading, “I mean, it’s a woman’s department.” But I sound like a weasel.

“They know us,” she says and though she sounds far away, probably still on the toilet, I can hear her grit her teeth.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I shout back, already slipping on my trench coat. “This is not the time for social niceties.”

“Tell that to your penis—it’s your fault” and then she raises her voice over the sound of the flush “You go out there and face the shame”

As I begin constructing a comeback, something about the number of times I’ve bought tampons for her and the girls, enough to earn a medal for womanhood, she has already slammed the bedroom door, leaving me standing in the hallway, full of my own righteousness.

“Dad? Has Mummy won again?”

It’s our youngest.

“Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

I can see her feet sticking out from under the tea table, her face hidden behind a book.

“Anyway, we’re not fighting.” I pat my pockets for my keys. “Sometimes we have discussions where Dad is logical, and Mum’s all emotions...you know?”

There is no response. But then, what was I expecting from a seven-year-old?

It takes two, I think, opening the front door and stepping out into the street.

Besides, isn’t it *our* penis?

The wind slaps me in the face.

Maybe that’s not a thing. Our penis. Oh, for fuck’s sake. What am I going to do? Three is hard enough. I’d have to get a bigger car, maybe a bigger house, and there is no way I’m getting a raise.

Standing outside our local pharmacy, I see the young blonde trainee inside attending to a customer.

How do I even mention this at work?

I hate it when Samira’s right; I can’t go into this pharmacy.

I’ve known the owner, her mother, and now her trainee daughter. The same one I’ve given suggestive glances to while pretending to have an interest in waxed versus unwaxed floss, as if I were doing a doctorate in dental hygiene. If I walk in there now, she’ll know I still have sex with my wife. My wife of twenty-five years. It’s like cheating. And worse, they’ll all know, sooner or later, that we’ve done something about it.

I check my phone and find another pharmacy a few blocks away, pull up my lapels, tuck in my chin, and set off as the last of the light fades and the shadows shrink back into hiding.

I would have to keep it all secret. I don’t need to tell anyone. Especially the team at the office.

Crossing a wide, open plaza, I pass a young couple on a bench, the woman with her head on the man’s shoulder while he idly pushes a pram to and fro.

I won’t invite Samira to the Christmas do, and if they catch me with a baby, I’ll just say it’s the neighbour’s kid.

At the other end of the plaza, teenagers in various states of undress frolic on a bench in a cloud of thick white smoke. Nearby, a mother watches, worn out, as her son runs laps around the square in a futile attempt to tire himself out.

Oh, I see what this is. A preview. A montage of what’s coming. The only thing missing is a frail old man pushing a walker with his grandkids in tow.

The pharmacy is tucked into a corner between a liquor store and an estate agent’s, with a sign half torn from the ceiling, and inside several people are waiting at the counter. A client is convincing the pharmacist to take his scrunched up, expired prescription.

I drift to a shelf and pretend to browse. I pick up a few items, turn them in my hands, until I realise they’re all baby products, and that I’m surrounded by milk powder, pacifiers, bottles, and I retreat, faintly nauseated, into skincare for adults.

A while later I leave with a small bag pregnant with foot creams, toothpaste, mints, two pregnancy tests, and courtesy of the pharmacist, a free, unbranded condom, which I thank him for, immediately regretting it.

I should have scowled. What do I look like? An irresponsible teenager?

I’ve been walking for about ten minutes when I acknowledge I have no idea where I am, and just as I reach for my phone, I hear a shriek and see about fifty metres ahead in the fading light, a man tugging at a woman’s handbag. He’s twice her size, broad-shouldered, the kind who probably lives at the gym when he’s not doing this. To her credit, she’s fighting back but is clearly on the losing end.

Before either of them notices me, I take a few careful steps sideways behind the nearest parked car, holding the bag out in front of me as if it might betray me if it rustles, and then cross the street gingerly without looking back.

Once I'm out of sight, I check my phone; I've wandered into a part of town I don't recognize and although it is only a few minutes from our house, some of the houses look abandoned and the street smells of piss. So, I pick up my pace, remembering Sherman McCoy, and what happens when you end up in the wrong part of town.

Feeling my pockets, I remind myself, half-mockingly, that I am no bond trader and that the only thing of value on me is the bag, and then, absurdly, worrying a mugger would nick the tests, (because, who knows, for their high resale value?) and I'll have to go through this whole process again I fish them out and stuff them down the front of my pants.

And they sit there the rest of the way home.

Next to *my* penis.